

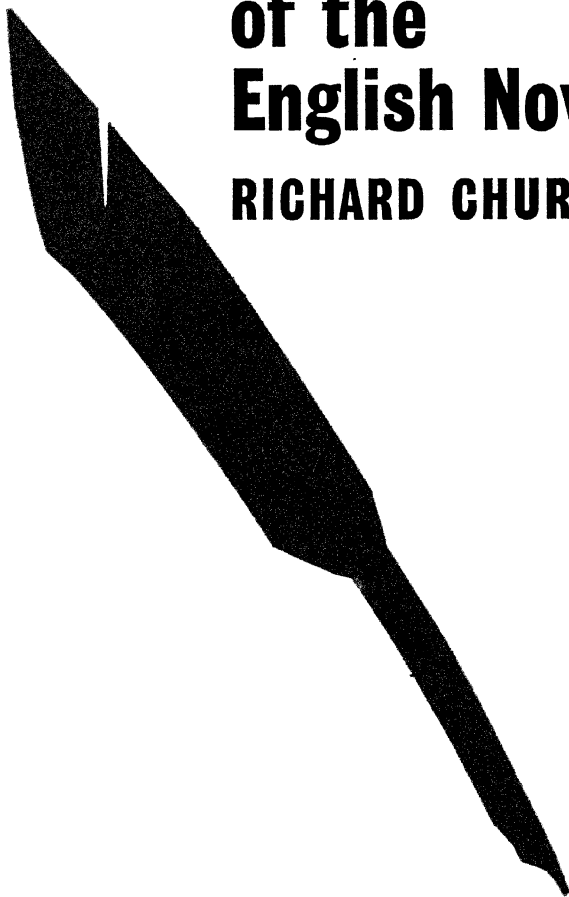


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The Growth of the English Novel

RICHARD CHURCH



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The Growth of the
English Novel

by

RICHARD CHURCH

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FRANK SWINNERTON

Foreword

This short study of the growth of the English novel has emphasized the historical approach, because only by this path towards any subject can one begin with, and retain, a sense of proportion and perspective. Contrary to a common idea of its function, history is the great preserver of freshness, because it is always reminding us of the warm, moist roots of things. It is like an oak tree, mastering time and space, to spread a shade under which dewdrops linger through the noon of the hottest summer day.

Further, the historical approach is likely to be the most detached and serene, for the reader to begin the work of a critical estimation, and the instructive juxtaposing, of the novelists who have contributed during the past six centuries towards the growth of this literary form.

On such a basis, it is unavoidable that the treatment of contemporary writers should appear to be perfunctory in comparison with that of the novelists finally delineated by the criticism of time. It is impossible, and certainly impertinent, for a critic to claim to place living writers, in relation one to another, and to the mighty dead. I have therefore left the picture amid-forest, my voice calling somewhat forlornly in the autumnal woods. For such I believe our season to be.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Seed-Bed

The English novel is a sturdy plant whose tap-root plunges deep through the centuries. We cannot pluck it up to examine it with microscopes, and weigh it in balances. But we can dig around a bit, without fear of killing the tree, and draw up from the sub-soil some evidence of origins, and of mutations.

Our conclusion will be that the novel, as we recognize it today, did not properly emerge until the eighteenth century with the work of Richardson, or at the earliest at the end of the seventeenth, with *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*. Since Richardson, the novel has made itself a special reflector of the goings on of human society, and the individuals comprising it, departmentalizing itself away from other forms of literature, such as the epic poem, the historical chronicle, the religious allegory, and after this detachment turning and swallowing its older brothers and sisters.

As a consequence of this evolutionary process, the general reader today tends to forget that the novelist is a poet, a bard, or at least a kinsman of those first beguilers. We see the relationship, and often the very identity, coming up again and again as a valuable reminder of the genesis of the novel, and of the obsolescent literary forms (such as the epic) which it contrives to replace. It is not always happy in this contrivance. Something is lost, a universality, a directness in the presentation of instinctive and racial forces, a faculty for symbolism. The price has had to be paid, and paid heavily, for the gain in realism and social sophistication, for the reduction of the adventure of

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life to terms of rational interpretation. But at times a novel appears (such as *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *Green Mansions* by W. H. Hudson, *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, *The Body* by William Sansom), to remind us that the novelist is more, and of a nobler heredity, than the mere recorder of births, deaths, and marriages; that he is concerned with the mystery of words and their music, and with events as representing something larger than our social comprehension can envisage.

This is a valuable reminder, because it refreshes our jaded appetite and restores our curiosity about the motives and possible fields of action open to the novelist. It also sets us wondering again what sort of brief the novelist began with, what is his scope and who defined it. We begin to look back to see how this art of story-telling began.

It began with verse narrative, and it was told or sung, not written. Metre was used to make the words memorable and more fixed in form. But of course the fluidity could not be controlled even by the most rigid rhyme-scheme. The act of presenting through the living human voice adds to, subtracts from, changes the tale, though the words may be exactly the same. Readers today appreciate that fact by their experience as listeners to the serial telling of well-known novels over the radio. Books by Hardy, Trollope, Dickens, and Thackeray, have taken on a new and slightly different life because, like the play, they have come upon us through the personalities of actors. In the beginning, all tales were presented that way, by bards and *scops* (the Saxon equivalent), whole-time professionals employed by an illiterate society to do the work done today by newspapers, books, and radio.

As something heard, rather than read in print, the tales were always adaptable. Local and topical events and themes crept in, parish news and the circulars of the castle, the larger flattery and the smaller irony. The wandering singer carried the folk-tale about like a string-bag, into which he dropped his gleanings and perquisites picked up on circuit. So the sagas took on all manner of shapes, like

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a child's Christmas stocking. It was indeed a childlike process, in the infancy of human society.

That elasticity in form has not left the novel, in spite of the restrictions imposed by the written word. It is not possible today to define exactly what is a novel. Bacon called it a 'feigned history' four hundred years ago, and that is perhaps as near as we dare to set the boundaries. But this would include Browning's *Ring and the Book*, and why not? Or Tennyson's *Maud*? If the function of a fictitious tale be to distil life's confusion of events and characters into a 'significant simplicity' (as R. L. Stevenson demanded), the verse-tale, by reason of its medium, does the job better than prose, because verse epitomises while prose displays. The theme has always overlapped. Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* might have been told in prose, and Hardy's *The Woodlanders* might have been told in verse, without altering the identity of the tales.

All this I emphasise to show the common origin of poet and novelist. Only their media are different. Their approach to life, their sensuous apprehensions, their interpretation in terms of significant symbol, may be different in degree; but they are the same in kind. That kind is the presentation of life through images. So far as they trespass away from that method, by introducing abstractions, ideas, generalisations, in the manner of the philosopher and the scientist, they are diluting the art of the novel and the poem, and sacrificing their strength. We have had two awful examples of it in the history of the life-work of two giants, Tolstoi and H. G. Wells. Both are novelists of a major genius, a force as nearly absolute in its vitality as it is possible for anything human to be. Both turned from that genius, perhaps not voluntarily, in order to subserve a conscience, and both died in anger and disappointment. But they were not original in this aberration. It is common among all people of genius, who are always anxious to escape their enslavement and infatuation, being maddened by its needs; but who, should they escape, are lost souls, self-accused of treachery. The first

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of our great novelists, Geoffrey Chaucer, was thus divided. On the one side, he was a creative poet who stood beside Shakespeare. On the other, he was a creature of his time, a busy Civil Servant and a man of affairs, ridden by doctrines and theories, those bugbears of the Middle Ages. And he could not prevent the activities of the second from crashing into the serenities of the first. And the trouble is that this second self in Chaucer was the one that experimented most in the development of the new medium of prose, the future garment of the novel. Thus, while adding this new continent to poetry (for such is prose, as Croce maintains), Chaucer was not always able to fulfil it with the bursting April life that springs in his verse.

Yet it is important to remember that from this huge fountain-head there trickled, as a side-stream, the new medium of prose which was to become the appropriate vehicle for the novel proper; that is to say, the novel freed from the trammels of the early romance and allegory, and given full play as a mirror of character and the working of society, under the light of truth. Without remembering this, we shall never understand a novel which transcends realism, and offers us people, incidents, worlds beyond the scope of ordinary experience. We shall never realize, indeed, that the novel is always tending, if not striving, to the perfectibility which it lost when it deserted its right quest, the perfectibility of poetry.

I have mentioned the medieval romances which supplied the material for the tales listened to by our ancestors, and read in the form of print by those few who were able to take advantage of it in later centuries. Roughly speaking, the sources of those romantic legends were two, one of them Celtic and the other Greek. The study of them is in itself a lifelong literary activity. It is no exaggeration, however, to say that Greece produced the first prose romances, and was thus the seed-bed of the European novel. The body of stories crystallized in the two great Homer poems, together with the history of Alexander, were the nucleus of innumerable divertissements, whose

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variations rolled out for century after century with increasing fancifulness and legendary excrescence, while from the Orient there crept in an Ionian strain of luxury and eroticism which was later to flower in the medieval French romance and to colour through that channel the whole of latter-day European fiction.

Another element that came from Greece was the fictional biography of the great man. These were mostly tumid growths upon a small centre of historical fact, and as time went on and more narrators took up and embellished the tales, the subjects ceased to be men and became either monsters or gods. But these lives of great kings, philosophers and poets (the three forms of the aristocratic ideal) were amongst the first themes upon which the writers of Greece first experimented in the form of prose. Alexander, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Virgil, all are names which even today have a magical significance amongst civilized people, only a pale shadow, perhaps, of that influence which they exerted not only upon the literature but upon the civil life of the Middle Ages. The figure of Virgil, for example, plays a major part in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, one of the first as well as one of the greatest tales to affect the cultural growth of what may be called modern Europe.

The oriental influence found its highest expression in the *Satiricon* of Petronius and the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius. From the former branched the unending line of picaresque tales which have established a unique department in European fiction. From the latter, since it contained so exquisite a version of the story of the love between Eros and Psyche, there has descended the enormous body of tales which sublimate, analyze, and debate sexual love, sometimes with realism, sometimes with symbolical intent.

Before the Greek influence reached England through the sieve of France, Italy, and Spain, there was a native source of supply in the great Celtic saga of King Arthur and his Knights and Ladies. Whether or not this huge body of legend originated in Brittany, Cornwall, or Wales,

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we may safely call it the Great British Saga into which our native writers are still dipping their buckets. Its counterpart in the Gallic world is the tale of Charlemagne, which came to us with the Normans. And we find that by the end of the fourteenth century the English romancers, forerunners of our novelists, had assimilated the four chief cycles of medieval romance. These were the legends of Troy, of Alexander, of Arthur, and of Charlemagne. The last, through the *Chanson de Roland*, brought into our literature an element of austere, remote, and entirely spiritual quality, a tincture which instantly coloured an existing native element of aesthetic melancholy, that we find running through our poetry and fiction. It is patent, for example, in the *Faery Queen*, in *Measure for Measure*, in *John Inglesant*, and the tales of Walter de la Mare.

In the fifteenth century, the Italian *novella* supplied the model for a more concise tale, with a love story and a rounded-off dramatic plot. And this was augmented by the powerful tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which followed in the sixteenth century. Before this last and so pronounced personality with his vigorous interruption, the English use of Latin sources, such as the *Gesta Romanorum*, had been largely lacking in narrative interest. The great weakness of the Middle Ages was, as with Communism today, its determination to theorise, and to overlay the incidence of facts with an elaborate interpretation of top-heavy allegory. The individual character was thus stifled. But with the Renaissance this was changed, for there came on this flood a sudden and passionate interest in human life and individual character. The phenomenal displaced the typical, and the result upon the art of story-telling was an instant sharpening of focus, and a concentration upon factual detail. This was a great step towards the modern novel, as defined by Ernest A. Baker, 'the interpretation of human life by means of fictitious narrative in prose'.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Cotyledons

Times in their ripening, like the seasons in nature, are punctuated by representative figures. The moment had now come, in the development in the art of the novel, for such a figure, or rather two in conjunction, to emerge. It is true that nearly a century earlier Chaucer had experimented in prose narrative. But Chaucer was a giant like Shakespeare, and such masters are often less representative of their period than are the smaller folk. Chaucer did in England what Dante had done in Italy; he set his native language into the matrix of modernity and thereby shaped the tool which our novelists are still handling to-day.

In this prophetic temper, he was impatient of the contemporary satisfaction in the flood of medieval romances, and we find embedded in the *Canterbury Tales* an amusing parody of all such stuff, which he was determined to replace by stories solid with a more genial humanity and humorous common sense. This parody, the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, is interrupted by the Host of the Tabard, who complains that he has had enough of such nonsense, and urges Chaucer:

*'To telle in prose somewhat at the leste
In which ther be som mirthe or som doctryne.'*

There follows the *Tale of Melibeus* which begins: .

'A yong man called Melibeus, mighty and riche, bigat up-on his wyf that called was Prudence, a doghter which that was called Sophie.

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‘Upon a day bifel, that he for his desport is went in-to the feeldes him to pleye. His wyf and eek his doghter hath he left in-with his hous, of which the dores weren fast y-shette. Three of his olde foos han it espyed, and settin laddres to the walles of his hous, and by the windowes been entred, and betten his wyf, and wounded his doghter with fyve mortal woundes in fyve sondry places; this is to seyn, in hir feet, in hir handes, in hir eres, in hir nose and in hir mouth; and leften her for deed, and wenten away.’

Here is an example of that sharpening of focus to which I referred in the preceding chapter. Nearly a century passed, however, before this development was used to further advantage in the growth of the novelist's technique. In 1469, Sir Thomas Malory, a member of Parliament from Lancashire, completed his relation, or what he claimed to be a translation from the French, of the Arthurian Saga. The growth of this saga is in itself a subject for a separate department of literary history. It is rooted in semi-mythical events which took place in England during the dark centuries between the departure of the Romans and the cohesion of the Saxon kingdom under Alfred. Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, was a Celtic Chieftain whose deeds and personality were so inflated by legend that by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in versions of the saga by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Robert Wace, he had become that fabulous king who still reigns in the imagination of every generation of childhood.

The wonderful conception of the Round Table was introduced into the tale by Wace, while Geoffrey of Monmouth was responsible for the character of Merlin, the poet and enchanter. Thus Malory was already presented with symbols for two of the greatest factors in the organism of human society, the Round Table alluding to the perpetual intrigue for place and power out of which arises the play of politics in human life; while Merlin is of even deeper significance, for he represents, as variously identi-

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fied with the Celtic bard and prophet Taliesin, the ever-living authority of the Word. The latter symbolism is not new, because as we have already seen in my reference to Virgil's appearance in Dante's poem, the *Makar*, the Man of Words, has always carried with him through the ages a dreadful and awe-inspiring commission. Moses was such a figure when he inscribed the Tablets of Stone. Indeed, we find in all languages, all religions and all mythologies this explicit assumption that the power of the Word, and of the poet who is its priest, is one of the chief instruments by which man lifts himself out of the animal world and climbs to Parnassus to fulfil his Promethean destiny.

The second figure to be associated with Malory is William Caxton, a cloth merchant of Tenterden in Kent, who, during a long period spent in the Low Countries as representative of this important English industry, developed a passion for the new art of printing. He returned to England and set up his press in Westminster in 1477, and among the first of his ventures was a printing of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Caxton was a modest and practical man, possessed by a determination to use the new art of printing for popular purposes. Had he lived today he might have been a great publisher. He was also a devout man, and in the preface of his edition of Malory he voices his misgivings about his venture for fear that the material contained in these stories may prove to be un-historical. Scholars have still to verify that matter, but meanwhile we can see clearly that with the *Morte d'Arthur* the English novel took a distinctive forward step.

Here was a prose medium which had discarded the florid decoration of the French romance. It was able thus to move more swiftly and to contain with more economy a larger number of narrative threads. With this advance in pace it was able also to present a greater variety of psychological contrasts. The fact that the *Morte d'Arthur* comes so early in our literature, and is still so picturesque in idiom, has deceived many people into the belief that it is a narrative naïve and childlike in characterization, as for

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example *Aucassin and Nicolette*, and other such early French romances. But Malory's tales of Arthur, his Knights and Ladies, are highly sophisticated. The more one studies them, the more one realizes that here already is a novelist at work through a merciless and shrewd observation, and a mature knowledge of the perpetual conflict, with its myriad manifestations, between the will and the conscience, the appetite and the aspiration of man. What is so marvellous is the way in which through the medium of a simple imagery comparable to that used later in the translation of the tales of Jewish political intrigue in the Old Testament, Malory presents a world where every form of advanced consciousness, both for good and evil, conveys a social drama whose subtlety is no less than that in which we live and suffer today. As an example, I give the following passage taken at random from Malory:

'Tell me, said Palomides, and in what manner was your lord slain, and by whom? Sir, said Sir Ebel, our king brought up of children two men and that now are perilous knights; and these two knights our king had so in charity, that he loved no man nor trusted no man of his blood, nor none other that was about him. And by these two knights our king was governed, and so they ruled him peacefully and his lands, and never would they suffer none of his blood to have no rule with our king. And also he was so free and so gentle, and they so false and deceivable that they ruled him peaceably; and that espied the lords of our king's blood, and departed from him unto their own livelihood. Then when these two traitors understood that they had driven all the lords of his blood from him, they were not pleased with that rule, and then they thought to have more, as ever is an old saw, "Give a churl rule and thereby he will not be sufficed; for whatsoever he be that is ruled by a villain born, and the lord of the soil to be a gentleman born, the same villain shall destroy all the gentlemen about him"; therefore all estates and lords, beware

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whom you take about you. And if ye be a knight of King Arthur's court remember this tale, for this is the end and conclusion. My lord and king rode unto the forest hereby by the advice of these traitors, and there he chased at the red deer, armed at all pieces full like a good knight; and so for labour he waxed dry, and then he alit, and drank at a well; and when he was alit, by the assent of these two traitors that one that hight Helius he suddenly smote our king through the body with a spear, and so they left him there. And when they were departed, then by fortune I came to the well, and found my lord and king wounded to the death. And when I heard his complaint, I let bring him to the water side, and in that same ship I put him alive; and when my lord King Hermance was in that vessel, he required me for the true faith I owed unto him for to write a letter in this manner.'

It is significant that both the preceding quotations are from French sources. Malory claimed to translate his work from the French (literary modesty in those days was a common quality which appears subsequently to have died out). The *Tale of Melibeus* was taken by Chaucer from the work of the French Jean de Meung, the satire as well as the substance coming from France. With these exceptions, however, English prose throughout the first half of the sixteenth century lagged behind French and Italian. It was still fledgling, and restricted heavily to the ground.

During that period, and under that restriction, a second great printer, Wynkyn de Worde, produced Lord Berners's translation of Froissart's *Chronicles*, a record of a courtly life in France when the conventions of chivalry flourished as a social and political counterpart of the literary traditions in the prose romances which Chaucer had both copied and derided.

Caxton had said at the turn of the century:

'The fair language of French, which was in prose so well and compendiously set and written which me-

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thought I understood sentence and substance of every matter.'

It was his aim to encourage and to dispense English prose that should possess the same quality: an aim which our best prose writers have been pursuing ever since. This French influence, shown in Chaucer, Malory, and Berners, appeared also in a work generally considered to be of the very essence of the English spirit. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* were at the time accepted as an ingenious improvement on the true story of the journeys made by Marco Polo. These tales of adventures on the other side of the world amongst monsters such as only the fantastic medieval imagination could create, became immediately popular in England. But *Mandeville* is a fake, just as *Robinson Crusoe* is a fake. It is the entirely fictitious work of a French doctor, Jean de Bourgoigne. Both works are corner-stones of the house of English fiction, that wing which holds the exhibits representing our national wanderlust, our love of remote places, and of the sea.

This lull during the early part of the sixteenth century was due not to lack of material but to an unconscious premonition of impending change. Coming storms carry a false quiet before them, and one of the greatest storms in the world of man's mind was about to break. But meanwhile from Italy, France, and Spain, the literature of chivalry flowed in, through translations of varying quality, most of it graceless and stiff. Here and there, a tale stands out with a distinction of dignity and an interest in the pursuit of virtue. One such was that of *Amadis de Gaul*, of Portuguese origin, a forerunner of the novel of manners which was later to flower in the work of Samuel Richardson, and thus to establish another dominant thread in the fabric of our English fiction. Its critical counterpart, *Don Quixote*, was later to become another vivid thread added to that already introduced by Chaucer in his affectionate parody of the traditions of chivalry. Both *Sir Thopas* and *Don Quixote*, while ridiculing the extravagances and fan-

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tastic rituals of the early romances, nevertheless took from them their aspiration after nobility of conduct and that devotion to a spiritual ideal which alone have prevented mankind from conducting its affairs in a wholly animal and materialistic way, with bestiality magnified under the direction of the human intellect.

During this fallow period preceding the intellectual and aesthetic revolution consequent upon the Reformation, two other permanent elements were added to the scope of the English novel. The first takes its name from the title of the book in which it began. Thomas More (1478-1535), now canonised by the Catholic Church, was a friend of that great wandering scholar and pioneer of the Humanists, Erasmus, a man who did as much to spread the light of a revived Greek learning in Northern Europe as Poliziano did in Italy. Thomas More also was a great scholar in the new learning, being a pupil of the Oxford Hellenists. He was a lawyer and statesman whose idealism and religious steadfastness were finally to make him a martyr. He was the author of *Utopia*, the book which reflected the original social idealism of Plato's *Republic*. Had he written the book in English instead of Latin its enormous influence might have begun more speedily, but it was not translated into English until sixteen years after his death. He was one of the first of Europeans to show a hatred of war, and to believe that the trade of the soldier is even more degrading than that of the butcher.

This idea was a more direct attack upon the ideals of chivalry, or at any rate the machinery by which those ideals were maintained, than anything written even by the genial Chaucer. Further, he painted a picture of a perfect community in which the possession of private property was discouraged, and in which the use of gold as a currency of exchange was unknown. In his dream-land a nine-hour working day was imposed upon every citizen, in return for which the individual should be assured of a full and comfortable life of material well-being out of which the

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natural virtues could flourish like the bay tree. Here was another attack, this time directed against the asceticism which in the Middle Ages had played a pathological part in the traffic of the Christian faith amongst the comings and the goings of everyday life.

This book was a wonder in the sixteenth century and is so today. The spirit pervading it is unassailable by time, and remains as clear and intoxicating to the reader as that which pervades the teaching of Plato. It summed up the whole doctrine of Humanism, and no Englishman subsequently has been able to project an imaginary society, or council of social perfection without drawing immediately upon the riches contained in More's *Utopia*.

The second element which entered the field at that time was what may be called the rogue-book or the picaresque novel. It began with a tale entitled *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) by an unknown Spanish author. The rascal, vagabond, servant or what you will, is the central figure in all such works. With the irresponsibility of the traveller, he observes life from the road, in passing. His detachment leads to scurrility, irreverence, moral licence. All satire and caricature spring from this source. It marks the beginning of the revolt of the underdog, and on its sinister side sounds the first ugly notes of the beginning of mob-rule in which the ignorant groundling glories in his brutishness and stamps the pearls of culture under foot; an activity to which democracy in certain of its aspects is prone. The influence of the picaresque was to be augmented by *Don Quixote* in which the Spanish master, Miguel de Cervantes, used this new technique, with its curious echo from the *Odyssey*, towards a nobler purpose, and also by the Elizabethan Englishman, Thomas Nashe, whose raffish genius will be referred to in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Secondary Leaves

We have seen how the English novel began its life in the rich soil of Chaucer's genius, the folk-tales of the Arthurian Saga, and the romances from France and Spain. We have watched Caxton consolidating the soil round the seedling, and we have seen and felt the alternate sun and warm rains of the first spring days of the Renaissance.

The story that follows is one of opulence from which we have to select those books representative of their time and influential towards the future development of the novel in its most characteristic English habits. The outstanding feature of the work henceforth done is the change of manner to suit the different modes of thought and impulses of temper consequent upon the new learning and the revolt from orthodoxy in religion and morals. The age of submission had passed, to give place to one in which enquiry and the assertion of self were to be the dominant motives. The immediate result was an enrichment both of the material and of its use by the story-teller. Once the licence was given to indulge and to record the vagaries of the individual within and often against society, the scope of the novelist became unlimited. It is small wonder that the restrictions and conventions imposed by the chivalric romances were no longer tolerated by writers, although the general reading public was well content, as it is content today, to carry on with the obsolescent modes.

The new learning now being pumped into the universities found a welcome lodging in the heads and hearts of a large number of talented graduates. As is usual in all artistic movements, and the advent of new schools, the

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pioneer came along to collect the stray influences and give them a direction. The conduit of the moment was a book called *The Palace of Pleasure*, published in 1556 by one William Painter, headmaster of Sevenoaks school and Clerk of the Tower of London, in which latter occupation he made a nice little fortune by speculation. This book consisted mostly of translations from the Italian *novella* of Boccaccio and Bandello. Together with a few imitative original pieces, Painter's work comprised about a hundred tales, most of which were of a didactic nature as a concession to the past. But they showed the beginning of real differentiation of character; so much so, that the puritan moralist Roger Ascham, in a pamphlet called *The Schoolmaster*, attacked the book as 'the enchantments of Circe, brought out of Italy to mar men's manners in England', and he made the curiously interesting accusation that all such story-telling was a device of the Catholic Church to rehabilitate itself in the minds of good English Protestants. This attack did not deter the dramatists from feeding upon the work of William Painter and other similar workers named Fenton and Pettie, who helped to pour out this flood of new, intoxicating material at a moment when it was likely to be appreciated.

The plots of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Rape of Lucrece*, *Timon of Athens*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are all to be found in *The Palace of Pleasure*, and thus we feel that this pioneer work could not have been more aptly named.

Again the pioneer was immediately succeeded by others greater than himself. In 1578 John Lyly, son of the Registrar of the City of Canterbury, published a book called *Euphues* which took cultured England by storm, and set a fashion in speech and manners that endured for ten years, when it was superseded by a new fashion again arising from the character of a book. Lyly was born in 1553, educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he made a precocious reputation as a wit. He took that reputation to Queen Elizabeth's court and there enlarged it

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under the patronage of Lord Burghley. He began as a playwright in the dusk preceding the dawn of Shakespeare. His popularity at court did not lead to any substantial preferment, owing, doubtless, to the vanity and shallowness of his character, but he had the satisfaction of seeing his book *Euphues* reprinted again and again, its style dictating that of a host of imitators, and setting a literary fashion which was never to die out, since we see its influence at work even in our own times. This means that the book after all was of considerable significance in spite of its somewhat frothy content. That content is the story of a youth who left the University of Athens to see the world. Arrived at Naples, he met with an old moralist called Eubulus, but rejected his good counsel and made a romantic friendship with a young man of his own age named Philautus. His brilliant wit attracted the attention of the new friend's lady-love and the consequence was one of the first stories of the eternal triangle. In the end the lady played off both lovers by eloping with a stranger, upon which the two men repaired their friendship and Euphues returned to Athens to write a treatise on education.

In spite of the popularity of this tale, Lyly was criticized because of his sharp portraiture of English court life, and he thought it expedient to write a sequel in which the two friends were brought to England where they met another wise man in Kent, proceeded to court where Philautus found a suitable lady and Euphues once more was left to retire to the academic cloister.

It is the manner, however, and not the matter which concerns the student today. *Euphues* was written in a prose elaborated with as much care as the most formal verse. Hitherto English prose had been solid stuff that plodded along on flat pedantic feet, weighed down by Latinate sandals frequently too large for those feet. Its pace was regular and slow, whatever purpose it aimed at. John Lyly changed all that; it may be said that he did it by a trick, a mechanical device which the grammarians call *isocolon*, the use of balanced clauses of equal length in the

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sentence. He also increased this seeking after verbal patterns by deliberate use of sound, with alliteration and assonance. It is in this latter practice that the mechanical effect of his prose was to be felt. An example of these stylistic devices is shown in the following sentence which also aptly describes not only Euphues himself, but the book to which he gives his name:

‘A young gallant of more wit than wealth, yet of more wealth than wisdom, seeing himself inferior to none in pleasant conceits, thought himself superior to all in honest conditions.’

Now this grammatical device is further standardized by a trick of logic, the argument by juxtaposing antitheses. This is a process of thought that can give an impression of depth to the most shallow reasoning. Examples of its use can be found both in prose and poetry today.

Add to Lyly's grammatical devices his fantastic similes, and we have that startling and abnormal mode which is always likely to become a fashion, a temporary craze. Lyly's achievement was so pronounced that it gave the name of *Euphuism* to all writing which indulges in verbal foppery.

I have referred to a second book which was to become the mode at Queen Elizabeth's court (and in those days the court was the centre of intellectual and artistic as well as of social life). After *Euphues* had been the fashion for ten years, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* published in 1590, four years after his death, set a new fashion which was really an English version of an ancient literary mode. Sidney was born at Penshurst in 1554, one of the most beautiful of houses in the most beautiful of English counties. The sylvan beauty of west Kent with its oak forests and chestnut copses has survived even the industrial age, and Sidney's birthplace stands today still with its sombre melancholy about it like a spell to hold the world away and the petty actualities of a passing time. One glance at this great house will make the reader of Sidney's

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book aware of the origin of its atmosphere. But he brought to the influence of his birthplace other sources of scholarship. Educated at Shrewsbury with Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, his lifelong friend and biographer, he remained a scholar throughout the later years of his life of vivid action as soldier and courtier. He was a complete example of the noblest kind of Renaissance poet-adventurer.

Arcadia was written in first draft in 1580 while Sidney was staying with his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, at Wilton. He was in temporary exile from court because he had dared to criticize one of the Virgin Queen's political hints at her possible marriage. He revised the book from time to time, elaborating its plot until it became as intricate as the pattern in a Persian carpet. The comings and goings and multiple disguises of the many characters in its four parts would weary the reader were it not for the skilful way in which Sidney interweaves the threads of the tale, or rather tales. This does not now concern us, for what remains of importance is the style in which the book is written and the bucolic artifice which it sets both in its title and its dress.

Sidney's classical education had made known to him the *pastorelle* which had come down through French and Italian writers of the Middle Ages direct from Theocritus and Virgil. Outstanding amongst the legion of imitators of these two masters were Boccaccio with his *Amateo* (1341) and another Italian named Sannazaro with his *Arcadia* (1502). A nearer incentive came from Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* which had appeared in 1579. This elaborate pastoral, with its archaic language coloured by a poetic genius which poured with a Mozartian fecundity from Spenser's pen, had an inescapable influence on contemporary letters, and Sidney with his temperament and close personal association with Spenser was not likely to escape it.

The *Arcadia* is a difficult book to assess because we know too much about the man from his poetry and his life, in both of which we recognize an ardent yet profound spirit

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driven to search for the utmost sincerity and virtue both in thought and action. No poet has followed more resolutely the counsels which he urged upon himself in the *Love Sonnets* written to Penelope Devereux, the young sister of the Earl of Essex, whom he met and loved when she was a child of twelve, but dared not court because of the Queen's baleful eye. 'Look in thy heart and write', he commanded himself, but this injunction was not carried out when he wrote *Arcadia*, for this first novel of its kind in England was written from the head rather than from the heart, and succeeded only in introducing into the English novel a foppery of sentiment to replace the foppery of grammar which had made *Euphues* so fashionable. The country scene which Sidney paints is highly artificed. All meadows are 'enamelled' with flowers, all birds are 'well tuned'. Both *Euphues* and *Arcadia* are covered with the exquisite filigree and artificiality which we can see in the miniatures painted by Hilliard at that time. When we look closer into them, however, we notice in the features of Hilliard's Elizabethan gallants a sub-quality of ferocity and restless agony which sits in their eyes among the jewels and ruffles like a serpent in the heart of a rose. The same disconcerting contemporary mood is found in *Arcadia*. It is something partly native English and partly European Renaissance, and it is terrifying, if only because of the deadly latency with which it rests in the bosom of its serene environment.

The historical importance of *Arcadia* is that it linked up the medieval romance not only with the bucolic scene, but also with the first real signs of a shrewd differentiation of character which was to lead later on to the comedy of manners, an approach to life that has played an all-important part in the growth of the English novel. It can be noted here that Samuel Richardson, a century and a half later, as the second great analyst of human sentiment, took the title of a book and the name of its heroine, *Pamela*, from a princess in Sidney's *Arcadia*. But it is significant that Richardson made his Pamela a servant girl.

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While Lyly and Sidney, both scholars and courtiers, were bringing ease, rhythm and grace into the gestures of our English prose, certain contemporaries were seizing this more flexible instrument of self-expression and carrying it out to the town for more popular and realistic uses. In 1592 there had appeared a Latin translation of the writings of Theophrastus, a fourth-century Greek who made word portraits of the chief human 'characters'. English imitations of this literary mode soon appeared; Bishop Hall's *Characters of Virtues and Vices* in 1608, Sir Thomas Overbury's *Characters* in 1614 and John Earle's *Microcosmographie* in 1628. These books were pure pamphleteering, the clumsy beginnings of the kind of journalism which came into its own when Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe) developed it to feed the primitive mental appetite of a population which had just been taught to read in the State schools. Its most tumid growth is to be found in America. The first principle of this kind of writing (if it may be said to have a principle) is that its content shall be personal and direct. It fastens on idiosyncrasy and accident, rather than on ideas and abstractions. Sensation is its meat, and scandal its drink.

Two young men from St John's College, Cambridge, came to London and lived short, wild lives which may be said to have set the pace and the mould for what later was known as Grub Street. They were the genuine hacks, who for the first time in the history of English letters tried to make a living by their pens, and to take the general public, instead of some private man of wealth, as their patron. Both died prematurely of debauchery. The elder of them, Robert Greene (1560-92) crammed much into his thirty years. He may be described as an English Villon, at least in his life. After wandering as a scholar in Italy and Spain, he came to London where he began to pour out plays and pamphlets. He tricked a gentleman's daughter into marriage and deserted her, finally dying of drink in the hovel of a shoemaker. His body was laid out in a shirt given by his host, for his own had long since been pawned.

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This picturesque end was made much of by the Cambridge pedant Gabriel Harvey (the long-eared don who tried to imprison English poetry within quantitative measures), for this prudish academic wanted to point a moral in order to uphold the threatened dignity of the profession of letters. However, Greene's friend Thomas Nashe, with the most vitriolic quill hitherto sharpened in this country, responded with a pamphlet called *Have with you to Saffron Waldren, or Gabriel Harvey's Hunt is Up. Containing a Full Answer to the eldest son of the Halter-Maker*. This refers to the birthplace of Harvey and to his father's trade. It makes much of the uses to which a rope may be put. The speed of the wit, the range of invective, the intensity of the venom, must surely have attracted the admiration of the young Shakespeare who at that time (1596) was writing *Romeo and Juliet*, and making Mercutio say:

'... what care I
What curious eye doth cote deformities?
Here are the beetle-brows shall blush for me.'

There were few blushes to mask Nashe's teeming satire. Below its acid surface moved an almost insane ferocity, the mood of the time, stirred up by the cruel whip of anarchic melancholy which blackened the consciousness of Renaissance Europe after it had left the safety of its home in the Medieval Church. Enlarging upon the experiments of his friend Greene in the delineation of eccentric and vicious characters, he wrote *The Life of Jack Wilton, or The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), and thus set a new type of English fiction based partly on the Spanish model of the rogue-book, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (referred to in Chapter II). Jack Wilton is a rascally page to the poet and courtier The Earl of Surrey, in the time of Henry VIII. Thus the character-emphasis makes the book a sort of travesty of *Don Quixote*, if one book can travesty another which did not appear in an English translation until eighteen years later, eleven after Nashe's death (he lived 1567-1601).

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The appearance of that translation of Don Quixote in 1612 (Part One only, the Second Part being delayed until 1620, with a revision of the First) added a corner-stone of such gigantic dimensions to the house of English fiction that it still juts out like a buttress. For this book is not merely a novel from Spain. It is as universal as the *Iliad*, or *Hamlet*. The characters and incidents in it have become household recollections, epitomes of the hopes, follies, nobility, and final pathos of the whole of mankind. With all this, it is also the picaresque novel *par excellence*, the matrix for all books of this kind that have been written since 1605, when it was published in Spain by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, the son of an apothecary. Cervantes was first a soldier, and he fought at Lepanto under Don John of Austria, and was wounded in the left hand. On the way home he was captured by Barbary corsairs, and spent five years as a slave in Algiers. During that time he enriched his mind at the fountain of the Moorish culture, and when he returned to Spain he at once began to write. But for a living he took a post as a Civil Servant (a frequent resort of literary artists) and worked in the Naval victualing yards. Later, he transferred to the Inland Revenue, but his arithmetic being faulty, he spent two periods in prison, under suspicion of being a peculator. After a first book, *Galatea*, much in the manner of the period (comparable with *Rosalynde* and *Arcadia*) he produced his masterpiece, and was immediately famous, not only in Spain, but throughout Europe. From an edition printed in Holland, the first English translator, Thomas Shelton, made his version of Part One of Quixote in six weeks! It is an astounding feat, especially if there be any truth in the rumours of the life followed by this shadowy figure. Shelton, an Oxford graduate, is said to have been a Catholic spy in the pay of Philip of Spain, living furtively in England, and engaging on this literary task with half his attention on the door of his room, in which he sat dagger in mouth, and pen in hand.

Nothing of these local conditions appears in the work,

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for Shelton's translation has an amplitude, a sense of opulent and musical leisure, that make it fit the original as a glove fits the hand. Shelton even translates the sonnets to Dulcinea del Toboso, the Knight's lady (of the wash-tub). The only other of many translations worthy to stand beside Shelton's are one by Motteux, a bookseller, made in 1700 (much more matter-of-fact), and one by Smollet in 1755.

Don Quixote is too vast a book in its imaginative scope to be called merely a satire upon the Age of Chivalry. Its caricatures in this kind are also portraits painted with passionate absorption upon the features of the beloved past. Perhaps the book may be summed up in a phrase taken from Chapter Twelve of Part One, where the Dolorous Knight is soliloquising in the Mountain of Sierra Morena, during the transports of his love for the all too solid Dulcinea. He says to himself, 'Let the remembrance of Amadis live and be imitated in everything as much as may be by Don Quixote of the Mancha, of whom may be said what was said of the other, that though he achieved not great things, yet did he die in their pursuit.' In that phrase lie both his purpose and his accomplishment, and this his contribution to the world's literature. It shows too how this great book was a channel through which the vanishing modes of chivalry, and the religious manners which they reflected, were not destroyed by ridicule, but carried with love into a new environment, that of the Renaissance and modernity, where Don Quixote's individual conflict against and on behalf of society was given a new significance.

Robert Greene had already, in 1591, preceded Nashe in the vigorous process of gutter commentary on human nature and its habits in society. His pamphlet *A Notable Discovery of Sossenage, Now daily practised by sundry lewd persons, called Cony-catchers, and Cross-biters*. This tract, and several that followed, set out to show up the devices of the various kinds of money-sharks that infested the Town. All this was lively enough journalism at the time, but its

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interest now is that it brought a technical aeration to the art of story-telling, thus lightening the medium of narrative prose.

Greene's novels, the first of them written while he was still at Cambridge, are moral in tone, and their style is imitative of that of Lyly, while their themes are as romantic as that of *Arcadia*. One of them, *Pandosto*, is so much like Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in plot, that we may assume it to be the source of the play. The titles of Greene's other novels are *Mamillia*, *Arbasto*, *Perimedes*, *Menaphon*, names which suggest to what kind of tale they belong. The medieval romance still supplied the general atmosphere in which all prose narrative moved.

Greene had another friend, an Oxford man named Thomas Lodge, who for a time played the Bohemian man of letters in London. He was the son of a rich man, a Lord Mayor of London (in this we may compare him with Beckford, the author of the oriental extravaganza *Vathek*, more than a century later). But Lodge had other interests. He studied law and medicine, he went to sea as a surgeon, and while aboard ship he wrote his most remembered novel, a romance called *Rosalynde*; remembered because it supplied the plot, as its name may suggest, for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. After that, Lodge lived on until 1625, a respected man of medicine.

Two other pioneers in the development of subject-matter for the art of fiction were Thomas Deloney (1543-1600) and Thomas Dekker, though the latter was not himself a novelist. Deloney was a man of the people, a weaver, and he wrote mostly popular ballads. His tales in prose opened a new field, one which is still valuable to the student of social history. His characters were members of the trade guilds, apprentices, and craftsmen, masters and men, and their wives and widows. He shows these hand-workers at their looms, and the picture is one which must have been seen in every prosperous village in the country during the seventeenth century, especially in the south

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and east. His book *The Gentle Craft* relates the history of cordwaining (shoe-making) from mythical times, and into the legendary lore he pours a rich anecdotage of contemporary scenes, customs, characters, including not a little hearty love-making amongst the craftsmen and their customers of the fair sex (mostly maidservants).

This book was imitated by Dekker in the still well-known *Shoemaker's Holiday*. Dekker was an extravagant writer, full of rhetoric and tall stories, but in this book, as in *The Batchelors' Banquet* (a crib from the French, showing the manifold miseries of married life), the story-telling is realistic, lively, and easy. This last quality is what is important, for it is exactly what was needed in English fiction at that stage. Dekker also imitated Greene's *Cony-Catcher* pamphlet in a book called *The Guls Hornebooke*, in which a silver-spoon simpleton comes to Town, to be fleeced by the usual taverners, prostitutes, thimble-riggers, and suchlike. One may fancy this book to be a forerunner of *Candide* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It is notable because it carries its material so lightly. Had Dekker, of *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, lived today, he would have made a good living in Shoe Lane, off Fleet Street.

Nicholas Breton, son of a rich London merchant, was another of these lively blades who were beginning to populate Grub Street and to loosen up English prose to make it a vehicle expressive of their cut-purse lives. His long prose soliloquies, under the general title of *A Mad World My Masters*, are a commentary on the times, racy, witty, touched with the pedantry that had run to seed from the Middle Ages and was now as light as thistledown. He dedicated his book to The Countess of Pembroke, Sidney's famous sister, who was the mother of Shakespeare's patron. One of his discourses, *Wits Will of Wills Wit*, has some prefatory verses signed 'W.S.' which have a tang of Shakespeare's sonnets about them, and make much punning play upon the name of Will. It is possible that the two men were friends, though Breton was nearly twenty years the senior. There was much taking in of

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each other's washing amongst the literary men of that time. It is a habit not confined to writers of the seventeenth century.

Here is an example of Breton's prose, to stand for that of most of his contemporaries as well, Shakespeare amongst them. The gesture of it, the verbal trick, the cocking of the phrase, the vivid generalisation so instantly recognisable, the making of the typical out of the instance; all such characteristics of Elizabethan prose are to be seen here, and registered as representative foliage of the tree of English fiction at that stage. The passage is a paragraph about Fear.

'Feare is a fruite of sinne, which drove the first Father of our flesh from the presence of God and hath bred an imperfection in a number of the worse part of his posteritie: It is the disgrace of Nature, the foile of reason, the maime of wit and the slur of understanding: It is the palsie of the Spirit, where the Soule wanteth faith and the badge of a Cowarde, that cannot abide the sight of a sword: It is the weaknesse in nature and a wound in despaire: It is children's awe, and fools amazement, a worme in conscience and a curse to wickednesse. In briefe, it makes the Cowarde stagger, the Lyer stammer, The Thiefe stumble, and the Traitor start: It is a blot in armes, a blur in Honour, the shame of a Soldier and the defeat of an Army.'

Other influences were at work upon the texture of our native prose style, however, some to enrich it with colour and light, others to strengthen and simplify it with more unadorned reasoning. The poets brought something to it, Shakespeare, Jonson, and the other dramatists, and Edmund Spenser in his long Civil Service Memorandum *On The State of Ireland*. From all such directions came these accesses of new quality to endow the future novelists with a medium of infinite flexibility and range.

Three outstanding contributions to this end were first,

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The Authorized Version of the Bible, which was printed in 1611 and remained the greatest moulder of our prose. A generation is growing up today who does not know it, except casually and as incidental amongst other books. But we see it still as a tincture in the style of modern novelists such as George Moore and his disciples David Garnett and Charles Morgan. Indeed, no writer fully conscious of his historical heritage can fail to betray at times some turn of phrase that has not crept into his blood from this source, as a memory creeps into the mind through the eye of the child who observes its mother's glance above it, while it is at the breast.

The second influence comes from two masters of noble reasoning, Bacon and Hooker; Bacon, the father of inductive reasoning and introducer of the succinct, lapidary phrase: Hooker, who in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (an unlikely source!) brought into English prose an amplitude of logical design which had lain dormant since Chaucer translated Boethius. And into this instrument for close argument, Hooker also introduced a quality, an atmosphere, of deep nobility which was later to find an echo in the prose of Newman, and a grandeur of tone that must have fed the oratory of Burke. Through these channels flowed further riches to endow our novelists.

The third contribution was made by an odd figure, a crabbed scholar who spent his life in the academic cloisters of Oxford, making of the new flood of Renaissance learning what the Schoolmen had made of the Thomist cosmogony of the Middle Ages. The universe portrayed by Robert Burton (1576-1640) in his vast olla podrida called *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is indeed a putrid one, its flesh and spirit rotten enough to suit the taste of the most world-weary and gloom-debauched palate. All knowledge was Burton's province, but he did not touch it until it had hung long enough in the library, where he could take it at his ease, or disease, having no other occupation, and a long life before him. Rusty mathematics, necro-

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mancy, geography (this a large ingredient to counter-balance his own sedentary life), medicine and astrology, the rotting fruits of Greece and Rome, all stirred in with the acrid herbs of his pedantic wit, these resulted in a dish for eccentrics.

English letters have always been distinctive because of these eccentrics, men who by some quirk of personality refuse to conform to any scheme of things, either technical, political, or ethical. It is their contribution to the flavouring of our native pot that perhaps makes it most distinguishable from that of the rest of European culture. A history and critical study of them still needs to be written by some scholar looking for a thesis. There they stand, perverse punctuations down the centuries, each with his small but faithful and renewed audience. And where there is eccentricity, there is a new element of style; for the man is the style. Thus their importance to the growth and maintenance of English prose. Shelton, Burton, Thomas Browne, Beddoes, Sydney Smith, Trelawney, Blunt, Doughty, G. M. Hopkins, here is a handful of names suggestive enough to the imagination of the reader. The part these eccentrics have played, and continue to play, for new ones occur from time to time, as flavourers of our English literary style is enormous. Look, for instance, at the following passage from the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and reflect how much this rhythm, and way of shaking-in the ingredients, affected the writers of the Romantic Period at the turn of the eighteenth century, with Walter Scott as their seeker after the apogee.

‘So likewise those that walk about midnight on great heaths and desert places, which draw men out of the way, and lead them all night a by-way, we commonly call them *Pucks*. In the desert of Lop in Asia such illusions of walking spirits are often perceived, as you may read in *Marco Polo the Venetian* his travels. Sometimes they sit by the highway side, to give men falls, and make their horses stumble and start as they ride, if you will

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believe the relation of that Holy man *Ketellus*, in *Nubrigensis* that had an especial grace to see devils, and talk with them without offence. And if a man curse or spur his horse for stumbling, they do heartily rejoice at it; with many such pretty feats.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tree Takes Shape

It can now be seen how the main branches of the tree of English fiction had set, giving an outline of the mature shape. Certain individual books had appeared, to give punctuation to these several kinds of prose tale. The romance, coming through from medieval times and destined to continue permanently, was represented by Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. The realistic vein (which included the criticism of human society) first shadowed by Langland in *Piers Plowman*, had introduced the professional writer and the birth of journalism, through the writings of a crowd of Elizabethan toughs led by Greene, Lodge, Nashe, and Dekker. Nashe, too, played another part with his *Unfortunate Traveller*, for this book, forerunner of Shelton's version of *Don Quixote*, set the mode for the picaresque novel, a form which continues to be a principal mode in the English development of the art. Finally, the comedy of manners, representing the intellectual pleasures and snobberies of the Court and the Academy, and concerning itself with the way of doing things rather than with their values, was set in the mould of *Euphues*, an authority which we can trace down the centuries as far as the fiction of Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ivy Compton-Burnett; impressive artists, behind whom flutters a host of lighter lepidoptera.

But this definition of shape was for a time to be obscured. Our English confidence in our aesthetic taste has never been firm. We have always looked upon ourselves somewhat as insular barbarians waiting at the door of fashion, while France and Italy are within, cutting the patterns.

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So, once again, during the troubled period of the Civil War in the middle of the seventeenth century, with the drama in abeyance through proscription, and our literary giant, John Milton, turned to writing propaganda for a philistine Government, native experiment in the art of fiction was dropped. Life became drab and austere under the Protectorate, and an antidote had to be found. It came from France, where the romance had emerged in a new form.

The conception of chivalry, behind which lay the compassion and sense of service brought into human life by Christianity, was now replaced by the new paganism of the Renaissance, and romance was dressed in the armour of heroic enterprise, and made to reflect the worship of individual self-assertion, the man of achievement, the tycoon. It was the old story of classicism retold, with emphasis not so much on the adventure as on the aggrandisement. It had its counterpart in the Court of Louis XIV with its sycophancy, its squalid pomp, and its unwholesome basis in an ignorance of history and economic fact.

Three French writers, the Sieur de Gomberville (with his *Polexandre*, 1632), La Calprenède (with *Cléopâtre*, 1646), and Madeleine de Scudéry (with *Le Grand Cyrus*, 1649 and *Clélie*, 1656) set the fashion. Their books were alike in being interminable. Every character was made to drag a chain of recollected adventures, all in the grand manner and decked with flattery, sentimental analysis, and an almost cynical re-dishing of the former preoccupations with love and honour. The scene was complicated because it had to indicate the new geographical excitement resulting from the discovery and colonisation of the New World and the East. Even love itself was mapped in terms of geography, for the famous novel *Clélie* contained a *Carte de Tendre* showing the windings and intricacies of fashionable amour as a *River of Inclination*, with the villages of *Pretty Verse*, *Gallant Letters*, *Complacence* and *Little Troubles* on its banks.

It was the sentimental analysis which contained the

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germ of a new treatment in fiction; one to be added later to the verbal subtleties of the comedy of manners and thus to present Richardson with his method. And it was this germ which gave the mode its vitality, and made it a medicine for the frustrated lives of English folk temporarily subdued beneath the elaborate and probing monitorship of a Puritan government. In this emphasis of the French writers upon the personal emotions (no matter how inflated and false) there lay a tonic for the individual debilitated even by the theory of equalitarianism.

For this reason there followed in England a period in which translations and imitations of the French heroic romance consoled a society drudging under the Protectorate, deprived of a theatre and other public amusements. Mademoiselle de Scudéry was the most popular of the French caterers, and her imitator Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery, with his *Parthenissa*, the most successful of the English. It was as though the more sophisticated aristocracy and intellectuals, lacking a life at Court in which to ventilate their wit, turned with a barely concealed depravity of moral taste from so much public emphasis on the puritan virtues, to guy them in this form of saccharine fiction. Chastity was scented, powdered, and hung with lace. Honour was heightened with a toppling wig. The familiar heroes of Greek and Roman literature and history were made into mincing fops who would be at home among the fountains of Versailles, strutting and moralizing. The artificiality was too marked for us to believe that it was accepted on its face value by intelligent and educated people in this country. It is all tedious enough in retrospect, like most demonstrations of insincerity and ennui. The English novel profited nothing from this interlude. Its life was flowing underneath this elaborate froth, amongst the modes of thought and conduct of the democratic puritans whose virtues this spurious romantic fiction almost dared to caricature.

It is no exaggeration to say that moral seriousness was the most nutritive food of the novel at that time. While in

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general the reading public still clamoured for the warmed-up romances of the age of chivalry, and the more fastidious demanded, and got, their confectionery from France, a reaction against both kinds of artificiality was setting in. The dawn of science was gleaming in the intellectual sky, and in the first year of the Restoration the Royal Society was founded. The aims of this body could never be expressed in a prose medium cumbered with the tropes and fripperies then fashionable. Men of serious mood, such as Pepys, John Evelyn, Fuller, Izaak Walton, in diary, theological discourse, biography, were to forge a new instrument with a sharper edge and less ornament. Had not the revival of the theatre drawn much of the new talent of the day towards drama, this cleansing of English prose style might have been more effectually seen in the novel. Even so, the young Congreve, a man of genius, published in 1692 a short novel called *Incognita*. First, and significantly, it was short. What a relief! Second, it had the concision of a play, with an almost geometrical pattern on which the author graced his comedy. That comedy is one of raillery, a forerunner of his still famous plays, whose life is in the verbal swordsmanship rather than in the purpose. Lacking a sense of true experience, Congreve soon tired of it, and ceased to write either fiction or drama. But while it lasted, the demonstration was superb.

Meanwhile, real life began to infiltrate, affecting not only the prose style, but also the theme of fiction. And where was life more real than in the treasury of stories to be found in the recently Authorized Version of the Bible? Here too was the central mood of the time, the true temper of the English people during this phase of their struggle toward a Constitutional personality, firm enough, and with enough sense of justice to survive the coming labour of empire-making. In this respect, the Bible is a book of proclamation, of going-out towards an adventure and a crusade. The journeys of the Israelites in the Old Testament, and those of the apostles in the New Testament, gave both incitement and model for the new national and

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moral consciousness of the English people. The mighty Book thus perfectly reflected the times, and the language in which it was clothed became the standard in almost every walk of life, from cathedral and Parliament, down to the Stock Exchange and the brothel.

As a moon to this sun, there appeared another book whose influence on English fiction was to be no less astringent. John Bunyan, the inspired tinker of Bedford, would have been disagreeably shocked had he known that his *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Holy War*, and *Life and Death of Mr Badman* were to be considered in connexion with the history of the novel. In the last of these three he refers to 'all the bad and abominable books, as beastly romances, and books full of ribaldry, even such as immediately tend to set all fleshly lusts on fire'. His purpose was not to amuse, but to instruct the people, his fellow-sinners, and to save them if possible from a fiery future. And he meant it. Here was no allegorist merely playing with ideas and conceits. His parable was as stark as that of the Prodigal Son.

From another angle, he was pruning the art of fiction even more mercilessly than were the utilitarians and scientists of the Royal Society. And he was pruning it to a native English shape, so that never again would it be able to imitate a foreign growth successfully. His authority was in his simple, even barbaric naïvety. He probably knew nothing of the fashionable literature of the day. The only meat for his mind was the Bible, and his inherited midland Englishness whose idiom still smelled of the byre, the kitchen, the ale-house and the village confessional familiar to Piers Plowman. He knew not Mlle Scudéry. He knew only the bridge over the Ouse at Bedford, the people coming and going across it, the little prison on it where, during his second incarceration, he was to begin to write his *Pilgrim's Progress*.

These were concrete observations, for that was how his genius worked. In this mystical matter-of-factness he was like William Blake, another confirmed allegorist who saw virtue and vice only as incorporate forces, engaged in

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actions which he was impelled to record directly, bluntly. With all the closeness and localism of his narrow literary education, he had a universal shrewdness and knowledge of business dealings as carried on by the new middle and mercantile class. His *Mr Badman* is a picture of a worldly, financial rogue, and it is drawn with a subtle detail worthy of the great novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, in his books he combines something of everything, except the fopperies of phrase which were the bane of the age. In form, his tales savoured of the picaresque, for they were adventures strung along a journey. But the way in which he stands aloof and watches the procession of humanity winding its way against the background of eternity, is reminiscent of the genius of Chaucer. Here again the comparison only emphasises the Englishness of the man and his work. His preference is always to tell a story, and through it to reduce ideas to some kind of concrete result. Abstractions he abhors. The effect of this is a valuable addition to the technique of the novel, as will be seen by the following example, a paragraph from *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

'We have been beset three or four times already. First, Christiana and her children were beset by two ruffians, who they feared would take away their lives. We were beset by Giant Bloody-man, Giant Maul, and Giant Slay-good. Indeed, we did rather beset the last than were beset by him. And thus it was: After we had been some time at the house of Gaius mine host, and of the whole church, we were minded upon a time to take our weapons with us, and go and see if we could light upon any of those that were enemies to pilgrims; for we heard that there was a notable one thereabouts. Now Gaius knew his haunt better than I, because he dwelt thereabout. So we looked, and looked, till at last we discerned the mouth of his cave: then we were glad, and plucked up our spirits. So we approached up to his den; and lo, when we came there, he had dragged,

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by mere force, into his net, this poor man, Feeble-mind, and was about to bring him to his end. But when he saw us, supposing, as we thought, he had another prey, he left the poor man in his house, and came out. So we fell to it full sore, and he lustily laid about him; but in conclusion, he was brought down to the ground, and his head cut off, and set up by the wayside, for a terror to such as should after practise such ungodliness. That I tell you the truth, here is the man himself to affirm it, taken out of the mouth of the lion.'

The narrative economy of that passage is notable, especially if it be compared with the contemporary methods of story-telling. How effective, for instance, is that frequent repetition of the word 'beset'. One can almost hear the buffets and the blows of the cudgels. And again, when the giant is dragging Feeble-mind into the den, the sentence interrupted with a plethora of commas makes us hear the labouring breath, and feel the strain.

Bunyan, however, was not the only writer of that time who pointed the way to an improvement in narrative technique. The artificiality of the heroic romance was already being attacked in France, the land of its origin. Boileau, in 1665, wrote a dialogue called *Les Heros de Roman*, and this was followed three years later by a story that profited from the great satirist's admonitions. *La Princesse de Cleves*, by Madame de Lafayette, presented not only characters, but also their emotional conflicts, with a direct and seemingly artless sincerity. The search for realism had begun.

In England, after the Restoration, the glamour of London life gave the Duchess of Newcastle the idea that folk in the country might like to be informed of what was going on in the capital. In 1664 she published a collection of over two hundred letters, and so became the first social gossip columnist, and set that epistolary form in fiction which writers in France and England were to exploit so tediously during the eighteenth century. This collection of

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letters was followed in 1678 by another, called *Five Love-letters from a Nun to a Cavalier*, which purported to be genuine translations from the Portuguese. In these, real passion displaced the sugary artificial sentiments of the heroic romance. A woman was revealing her heart (though it has since been found that the letters were written by a Frenchman named Guilleragues).

This literary form was taken up by a singular English woman, so singular that she might be classed among those literary eccentrics to whom I have already referred in the chapter previous to this. Aphra Behn was a combination of incongruities. 'I would treat of philosophy in a manner altogether unphilosophical' she says of herself. And she did so. She was also a realist with no sense of reality; a characteristic which gave a piquant flavour to her flood of romantic tales and plays. She combined an indulgent, sensual nature with a lofty humanitarianism, and this combination of opposites gave her writing a quality that foreshadowed the work both of Rousseau and Georges Sand. The method of the epistle, with its air of continuous intimacy, suited her genius, which was one expert in the handling of the *crime passionnel*. What romance she had in her nature was not that of her own period, but rather of the early nineteenth century, with a revolutionary under-current that aimed at freeing not only the passions, but also the mind from the dogmas and restraints of authority.

Her life was as turbulent as her writings. Born at Wye in Kent (near Ashford), in 1640, she was the daughter of a barber named Amis. This fact she later concealed in the autobiographical labyrinth of her tales, preferring to persuade readers that her father was Governor of Surinam, in the West Indies where she spent her childhood. Returning to England at the age of eighteen, she found employment as a secret service agent in the Low Countries, where she married a Dutchman named Behn. She soon became a widow, but pursued her special task of double-crossing the English Republican agents exiled abroad.

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She also brought home the information that the Dutch intended to raid the Thames, but this material was not credited by the Government. In her disgust, and angry with the sparse remuneration for her work, she turned to letters as a profession, and thus had the distinction of being the first English woman to live by her pen.

She began as a playwright, because of her native skill in theatrical contrivance, and her lavish use of pruriency. The main body of her stories, however, was not heroic. The emphasis is indicated by their titles: *The Fair Filt*; *The Adventures of the Black Lady*; *The Unfortunate Happy Lady, a True History*; *The History of the Nun, or the Fair Vow-Breaker*; tales which looked for models to the Italian *novella*, and the *Exemplary Novels* of Cervantes. They catered for the cabined emotions of the new middle class, providing an outlet for erotic yearnings, and twisting the monotony of everyday circumstances into imitations of the heroic pattern.

Towards the end of her life she wrote her most famous tale, *Oroonoko* (1688, the year before her death). Here she combined all her qualities in a more harmonious whole, the result being a piece of work of considerable prophetic power. Its theme is that of a Negro prince who fell victim to the already widespread slave-trade with the West Indies. There is a strong and persistent love-element, for the hero has found his soul-mate while still a free man. She relinquishes her freedom in order to die with him after both have been betrayed by the false promises of the so-called civilized and Christian white folk. This vivid tale contains a little of nearly everything that was to come later; humanitarianism, the outcry against slavery, the cult of the noble savage, the scorn for religious protestation in a society giving itself up more and more to commercial paganism; and finally, the attempt to find in contemporary life, realistically presented, a universal significance. So we find that in this first woman journalist, imitator of every mode of the hour (including the wearisome series of *Epistles*), there lay, prematurely, aspects of the novel

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which were to flower in the work of Swift, Richardson, and Flaubert; an apparently incongruous brotherhood.

After Aphra Behn, pure fiction became lost in Grub Street for the remainder of the seventeenth century. Other women took to writing as a means of livelihood, exploiting contemporary scandals and exploring the art of mud-slinging. In thus preparing the way for the gutter-press, they also eased still further the trappings of prose style. Such writers as Mrs Mary Manley and Mrs Eliza Haywood carried this vogue into the following century; familiarizing the undress manner of literary style, the language of the people, but adding nothing else from which the novel might draw strength.

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The art of fiction may be compared to a glove upon the hand – the hand being human society. According to the articulation of that hand, so the movements of the glove are determined. We see therefore that with the final breakthrough of the mercantile class after the Revolution of 1698, new ways of life, new values in morals, social habits and individual taste, brought about an equivalent change in the form and content of the novel. The aristocratic outlook, with its detachment from detail, its proud leisure, its arrogant solitude, its unquestioned command of labour, was being attacked and discredited. Its characteristics were those which had fostered the growth of the romance, with humans approximating to godlike beings. The art reflecting this outlook was of necessity one of general terms, vague, idealistic, conservative of certain first principles of conduct and social duty.

With the opening of the eighteenth century, the rifts in that system had opened wide, and through the gaps there emerged the middle class. The immediate result was a revulsion of taste away from the chivalric romance, which represented too closely the oppressive forces lately overthrown, the Universal Catholic Church, the Feudal System, the land-owning caste. All these were based on rigid principles, deductive dogmas. Therefore they had to be attacked not only on economic and moral grounds, but also on philosophic. The cruelty of abstractions must go. Men must no longer be forced into a social mould, regardless of their personal qualities.

The new men coming into power, with their money,

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izing in a form of writing that was to have marked formative influence on the English novel, and to establish him as an embodiment of the philosophy and virtues taught by John Locke.

Encouraged by the fact that his dangerous pamphlet had succeeded only too well in being taken literally, he set out to exploit his wide knowledge and experience of the world in the search for a literary technique which may be called that of 'circumstantial evidence'. He taught himself to write as though he were an expert witness in a court of law. He made great play with chapter and verse, consultation, and corroborative evidence. He became an expert in liming the twig. He made his characters verify each other's testimony. He made fiction pretend to be something other than fiction. It may be that the puritanism lingering in his blood from childhood determined this odd line of development, for he appears to have been half-ashamed of being a mere teller of tales, and he had to give his work a semblance of social purpose. In order to avoid being a liar he had to elaborate a marvellous machinery of mendacity, by which a lie was made so perfect that it outvied truth, at least in its appearance of circumstantiality.

This was just what the public wanted. Here was a writer who did not, apparently, try to force doctrine or dogma down the reader's throat. He merely presented facts! And facts were in fashion, for they were the raw material of the new scientific thought, and the philosophy of empiricism which is fundamental for the self-making man who has learned to take things as they come, and to pit his single character and wits against them. The late Henry Ford gave an excellent and typical example of this way of looking at life when he said that 'history is bunk'. History infers a reference to tradition, to accepted authority. The new mercantile world had had enough of that. All it asked for was a sample of the goods. Daniel Defoe gave it.

The moral value of that transaction is debatable. Its literary virtue cannot be questioned, for it demanded from

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the author that his whole attention should be given to the making of unequivocal statements. He who deals in facts, manipulating them as the sole means of presenting his case, has to be accurate, as every statesman and statistician know. And in the new order of things, with its mercantile standard of values, facts were to become sacred. Neither science nor business could flourish without them.

It was not until he was nearly sixty years old that Defoe found his perfect prose medium. By that time he had stored up much knowledge of the world. He had failed in business, and had grown weary in public controversy, as a pamphleteer. In April 1719 he published *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner*. By August the book had been reprinted four times, and Defoe had also published *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, which like so many sequels is something of an anticlimax. Edition after edition continued to appear, and the book's fame spread throughout the civilized world.

The theme of the tale, a man living alone on a desert island and contriving by one small ingenuity after another to maintain himself against the oppression of nature, was admirably suited to the new point of view. Here was an individual who need no longer concern himself with the remote and more abstract problems of human society. All he had to do was to provide himself with gadgets in order to keep alive. Defoe let his genius loose for this purpose, and his book is thus a masterpiece of concise creation, in which the prescribed little world is exactly filled with the most convincing detail. The process is like the development of a proposition in mathematics. Once the preliminaries are accepted, the rest follows inevitably. The reader can ignore the one fact that gives the lie to all the others which build up, microscopically, the substance of the tale. That one fact is, that the whole thing is a fabricated tissue, based precariously on a literary rather than an actual foundation. For Defoe took his principal ingredients from contemporary travel books, the chief influences being Dampier's *New Voyage Round the World* (1697) and A

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third person could have invented a fact in that way. It is really an elementary device; but it has hoodwinked the whole world ever since, and has substituted the authority of circumstantial evidence for the authority of truth.

There was a contemporary of Defoe, however, who refused to be taken in by this new pseudo-morality. His name was Jonathan Swift. In writing of this master of English prose style, the critic treads timidly, for fear of being wafted off to that Island of Laputa which Gulliver visited, where figures could be summoned out of the historical past. Even the ghost of Swift's pen might be lethal, recalling the satirist's proof that Criticism is the base issue of Ignorance and Pride. But Swift, although no novelist, has to be considered as a factor in the development of the novel, because he completed and perfected the technical devices begun by Defoe.

Swift would have flayed me for making that statement. Defoe he held in contempt as a low-born Whig, 'the fellow who was pilloried'; but there may have been a bit of professional jealousy in this contemptuous dismissal, for Defoe had forestalled him by a few years, and forced him to borrow from *Robinson Crusoe* numerous devices used in *Gulliver's Travels*; the shipwreck, the provision of small evidences that build up to a semblance of reality and first-hand evidence. He would not love Defoe the more for that, in spite of the good-heartedness and excessive sensibility which he was said to exhibit in his private life. His pride was excessive, and this tumid condition threw out the whole balance of his nature. Again, Defoe's interest in the intimacies of human life, in its individual characteristics, its everyday traffic, all the domestic minutiae of the fabric of society, were for Swift irritants that finally drove him mad.

The new order of society, with its ledger-keeping ideals, served only to increase his disgust for the whole human race. In *A Voyage to Laputa* (Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels*), he says 'How low an opinion I had of human Wisdom and Integrity, when I was truly informed of

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the Springs and Motives of Great Enterprises and Revolutions in the world, and of the contemptible Accidents to which they owed their Success.' In his hatred for all the processes of the human body, and the temptations and succumbings consequent thereon he is to be compared with Bernard Shaw and Aldous Huxley. All three longed to scour the human race in an everlasting bath of carbolic, and to lower the temperature of our blood by means of some social mechanism yet to be invented. Such an aim is aristocratic: it denotes the aristocracy of intellect, turning with horror from the welter of democracy. It comes from too great a standard of perfectibility. The idealism has risen so high that the snows and airless inanition have settled round it. At that height, and in that solitude, ordinary men and women cannot move about, for the authors to make their acquaintance, and to learn to love them. That is why neither Swift nor Shaw is a novelist, though both are equipped with the faculty for storytelling, and a lucid prose style.

Swift was born in Dublin in 1667, seven years after the birth of Defoe; and his most famous book *Gulliver's Travels* appeared in 1727, seven years after *Robinson Crusoe*. Both authors wrote from personal experience of the world. Swift had been the friend and influential adviser of Ministers of State, and his prospects rose and fell with those of Administrations. Like most Courtiers and seekers of office, his life came to bitterness in the end. This, with the aggravation caused by his equivocal relationship with the two women who loved him, inflamed the native temper of his mind, and he died in 1745, after several years of lingering upon the frontiers of madness.

I have said that Swift was not a novelist: but this sounds almost perverse when we recollect what is the position of *Gulliver's Travels* in the history of the English novel. Within its short and classically perfect prose period, it contrived to make itself an example of the new realistic mode, as well as of the picaresque. Gulliver combined in his character both the wandering rogue and the questing

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knight. His adventures in remote lands and among fabulous peoples conformed to the demands of a world crazy under the stimulus of geographical adventure. The New World was substantial enough. It was also a symbol for all the possibilities of intellectual exploration. Gulliver adventured in both the actual and the symbolical.

But what was he seeking? He was looking, and looking in vain, for a medicine that might cure his author's spleen. How characteristic of the whole quest is the following sentence. 'It gave me melancholy Reflections to observe how much the Race of human Kind was degenerate among us, within these Hundred Years past.' Neither with the reducing glass, nor with the microscope, was Gulliver able to see men and women as objects other than for contempt, loathing, and scorn. The habits of individuals, the customs and rituals of society, all were contemplated but never shared, and from all he turned with disgust. This characteristic is one that is shared by so many would-be reformers and critics. The Savonarolas of the world are an unhappy kind. In their zeal for perfection they will make no compromise with conditions and circumstances. And their constant irritation impoverishes their manners and destroys their charity. Too often one finds the reformer, working himself mercilessly in the cause of social justice, to be in private life a person of savage and tyrannical temper, eaten up with egoism. His activities in the field of literature might almost be specified as a school which I should call that of the Gastric-Ulcer, so sour is it in its action and its results.

Swift was the founder of that school. His followers are many, and some of them distinguished. Shelley put in a few terms there, but the régime was too acid. Byron found it more congenial, and might have stayed had he not hated all restrictions. Thackeray made a short stay, but was expelled for being too great-hearted. Samuel Butler and Shaw stayed long, and were moulded for life. Some of the later generation are obviously marked by that teaching: Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Graham Greene,

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Evelyn Waugh, Patrick Hamilton, Ruthven Todd, to name a few contemporary novelists of merit.

These writers, with their bitter medicine, are necessary for the well-being of society, and in our splenetic moods we enjoy their work. But satire is in the end its own bane, and the human spirit cannot feed upon it. It does not nourish the imagination, and it starves the powers of reason. The particular kind of faith which ends in satire, is not the faith that enables a novelist to explore the whole universe of humanity. It is like the long-sight of senility, which sharpens the distant image, but blurs that near at hand. That is why I have called Swift no novelist.

But he has been a model for all novelists. His prose has the directness of Defoe's but a wider range and greater depth. It carries vast learning as easily as Defoe's carries its pack of personal experience. It can do what Defoe's does in the evocation of scene and dramatic suspense, as will be seen by comparing the following passage with that quoted above from *Robinson Crusoe*. Gulliver had just left his 'poor wife big with child' and taken a commission as Master of a ship named the *Adventure*. Augmenting his crew at the Leeward Islands, he found the newcomers to be buccaneers, and was powerless to prevent them from marooning him on an unknown island.

'In this desolate Condition I advanced forward, and soon got upon firm Ground, where I sat down on a Bank to rest myself, and consider what I had best to do. When I was a little refreshed, I went up into the Country, resolving to deliver myself to the first Savages I should meet; and purchase my Life from them by some Bracelets, Glass Rings, and Other Toys, which Sailors usually provide themselves with in those Voyages, and whereof I had some about me: the Land was divided by long Rows of Trees, not regularly planted, but naturally growing; there was great Plenty of Grass, and several Fields of Oats. I walked very circumspectly for fear of being surprised, or suddenly shot with an Arrow from

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behind, or on either Side. I fell into a beaten Road, where I saw many Tracts of Human Feet, and some of Cows, but most of Horses.'

One can see there the debt to Defoe; but also something more, a quality of muscular reserve in the mind at work, which gives this simple prose a kind of promissory power, for music, for anguish, for subtlety of argument. What Swift's technical aim was can be learned from the following passage taken out of a dedicatory letter, to the Earl of Oxford.

'If it were not for the Bible and Common Prayer Book in the Vulgar Tongue, we should hardly be able to understand anything that was written among us an hundred years ago; which is certainly true; for those Books, being perpetually read in Churches, have proved a kind of Standard for Language, especially to the Common People. And I doubt whether the alterations since introduced have added much to the Beauty or Strength of the English Tongue, though they have taken off a great deal from that Simplicity which is one of the greatest perfections in any language.'

Swift has done more than any other prose writer to establish that *Simplicity* as a standard of good English prose style, towards which the novelist, amongst other writers, naturally aspires. Embellishment and trope in prose are now the habit of beginners in the art, of writers in the comedic vein (see George Meredith's essay on this matter), or of verbal fops touched with some mannerism of conceit or wilful perversion.

After the publication of *Gulliver's Travels*, the history of the English novel becomes immediately clarified for here was the model for blending realism with the central and propelling idea, and conveying the whole purpose in a medium that ran smoothly and economically to its goal.

Four Mighty Limbs

The way was now prepared. An appropriate prose medium, sufficiently pliable to clothe the ideas and sensations arising out of a larger social and individual consciousness; the freeing of that consciousness by the conditions granted under a growing political constitution; an increasing middle-class public endowed with these riches and demanding a literary expression for them; these were the conditions providing the humus to feed the English novel during the eighteenth century.

History rarely provides conditions without supplying men to fulfil them. That is where the genius of history, humanity's overtone, reveals itself. When, as on occasion, it fails, then the story of man is marked by a period of confusion, of stagnant uncertainties, and decay. At such times, empires fall, arts and sciences perish, and the human family becomes a mob vicious with materialism.

On this occasion, history showed its genius to the full. Four giants arose to supply the demands of the age; Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. The greatest of these was Fielding. What Shakespeare was to the whole of life and literature, Fielding was to the English novel. In the course of this chapter I will try to show why. But first we have to consider Richardson, because his activity and achievement further prepared the way of Fielding, and gave a more marked definition to a whole branch of the English novel.

Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), more than any of the four giants, was a spokesman of his own time. That is why he was the most successful, why his work created a fashion

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that produced a cult in which his qualities and reputation were inflated beyond their fundamental worth. He was born into the very centre of that middle class whose needs were in future to determine what the supply should be, in politics, science, art, and morals. Son of a Derbyshire carpenter, he came with his family to London, and was apprenticed there to a printer. He was industrious and prudent. He married his master's daughter, inherited the business, enlarged and improved it. Settled in Fleet Street, he became printer of the *Journals of the House of Commons* (forerunner of *Hansard*), and in 1754 was elected Master of the Stationers' Company. Thus he had a successful career, and we can see him as a typical bourgeois figure, plump, assured, dignified, and comfortable. There are many portraits of him in words, the best and most frequent painted by himself. For he was abnormally vain.

That vanity indicated something else. Richardson was a man of genius. Those who appreciate what a dangerous possession this can be, will marvel at the equanimity with which Richardson harmonized his two selves, the man of business and worldly affairs, and the writer of genius whose idiosyncrasies summed up the spirit of the age. There was justification for his vanity, especially as it hurt nobody but himself.

How to indicate the quality of that genius is no easy matter. We have to approach it historically. The ground had already been prepared for its activities by Richard Steele (1672-1729) and Joseph Addison (1672-1719) who in *The Tatler* (1709-11) and *The Spectator* (1711-12) ran for four years a periodical whose kind has never been surpassed, and is to this day imitated in the middle leaders of *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, and in the weekly journals. They established the literary form known as the *causerie*. It is chattiness raised to a fine art. Sitting on the fence of benignity, Steele and Addison (so complementary to each other in temperament) chatted about life in general, and moral and civilized conduct in particular. The prose in which they chatted eased still further the

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verbal periods of the age, and showed itself a perfect vehicle for the sentimental sensibility which remained the middle-class method of approaching life until the hard competitiveness of the nineteenth-century machine-made industry both seared and cauterized that softness. Addison especially was a fully civilized man, and it is unlikely that Europe will again produce a social atmosphere in which so fine a flower can open its petals, and keep them unsooted by the smoke of commerce, unruffled by the winds of democracy.

These two pioneer journalists had gathered together a huge audience. It was unanimous in its tastes. It was the great middle class inheriting from the Puritans who had established constitutional monarchy in England, and was now beginning to enjoy the economic fruits of that establishment. The puritanism was still there, at that stage to control the corruptions of comfort and wealth by emphasizing personal responsibility. But that personal responsibility was becoming secularized, and in this form it pervaded daily relationships, adding new features of sensibility, fastidiousness, humanitarianism to the common approaches among mankind, and between the sexes. This was a great revolution, for it was soon to disturb the accepted balance between man and woman in society, in the home, and in the ever fresh adventures of marriage. The feminine aspect of life was beginning thus to make itself more apparent, and there appeared for the first time the secondary condition of this. It was a sort of epicene blandness of manners, in which the storms of life (and particularly its sexual storms) were reduced and captured in the tea-cups of the eighteenth-century drawing-rooms and boudoirs.

From this milieu emerged a new type of male whose activities were various and of many degrees. One thinks of Addison, of Horace Walpole, of Thomas Gray, William Cowper, and Gilbert White. But above all, one thinks of Samuel Richardson, because he brought this new way of life out into the open, and found an exactly appropriate

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expression for it in the novel of sensibility. Here was the sedentary male, more interested in speculation than in action. His moods, his preoccupations, exactly fitted the intellectual fashions which had turned away from the theatre for awhile (in reaction against the excesses of the Restoration comedy) and found poetry too rigidly classical in its forms to be instantly acceptable as a conveyor of the new thought and feeling. But in the novel, the man of feeling, with his stillness and gentleness reflecting woman in her full femininity, could explore at leisure the microscopic data of the human comedy.

Leisure is the keyword for this new occupation in literature. Leisure, with its corollary, patience, was the basis of Richardson's genius. To watch him writing a book is like watching a woman buying a new hat. And for a man, it can sometimes be just as embarrassing, with its indecisions, its touches of acidity with attendants, its holding up of the more urgent and important matters of life (from a male point of view). We begin to feel that we are treading on thick carpet, in overheated rooms. The discursiveness becomes intolerable, but there is nothing we can do, for after all, this matter in hand is being worked out with exquisite skill, tact, and sensibility. Even if we breathe heavily, we shall interrupt that intimate drama, and so in the end, like Gulliver, a million silken threads hold us down, half-willing captives in this Lilliput world.

The way in which Richardson began as a novelist gave him, by lucky chance, a medium suited to this artificial atmosphere of attenuated refinements. It was suggested to him by some fellow-printers that he should write a series of letters to be called 'Familiar Letters, on how to think and act justly and prudently, in the Common Concerns of Human Life'. This was in 1739, when he was already an elderly man. In effect, he spent the rest of his life in this somewhat priggish task, for his novels, *Pamela*, *Clarissa Harlowe*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*, are enormous variations upon this theme, the dominant being that word 'prudence'. It is also the keyword to the middle-class way

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of life. That is why Richardson was so perfectly in tune with the age.

While writing the *Familiar Letters*, Richardson recalled how some quarter of a century earlier, he had been told a story about a servant girl of great beauty and virtue, who resisted the young squire's assaults upon her chastity, a commodity which she handled as a banker handles his capital. Her prudence triumphed, and finally the squire offered her his hand in marriage, in return for the coveted gift. And after that consummation, she ruled him with reins of silk, controlling his passions with the blinkers of matrimony.

The story of this assault and resistance became the novel *Pamela*, in seven volumes of letters, most of them written by the beleaguered girl to her unresponsive parents. It is today a story whose moral standards are pusillanimous, sometimes indeed contemptible. Here is this handsome girl manipulating her one asset, physical chastity, as though it were a commodity in the world of commerce. She is emotionally attracted to the man who wants to abuse it, but she is cautious enough, and untrusting enough, to hold him at arm's length, and in the hand at the end of that arm she holds the pen with which he is to sign the contract before she will deliver the goods. It is all very *bourgeois*, in the derogatory sense of that much maligned word. Nor is the transaction real. For one thing, no parents would remain so inert towards a daughter tied to them by such ties of intelligence and spiritual and moral consciousness as are displayed in this girl's letters. But Richardson did not undertake to deal in that kind of reality, the sort which Defoe had set up in a mechanical way, but without creative instinct. Fielding was to take that up later and to open out in it the whole future field of the English novel.

Richardson's realism was in the functions of the mind. He was the first true psychologist in the art of fiction, isolating individual personalities and dissecting them with infinite patience and skill. But he did not isolate the

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character, that which makes the individual in social intercourse, and in the art of fiction. His people still are types rather than individuals, and this is because he is more interested in what their motives and reactions are, rather than in what they *do*. And even that interest is somewhat second-hand, for he does not present those mental activities directly, by his own narrative, but through the characters themselves, as they show as much as they want to show through their letters to each other; so that there is always a thin veil of theory wrapping up the fact; the theory of self-consciousness concerned to make the most of its presentation of circumstances. The subtlety which results is infinite; and it is something which had never before been known in fiction. That is where Richardson's originality is shown, and in that we find his great contribution to the art of the novel.

But the bad thing about this method of telling a story by means of a series of letters is that the characters in the book are sitting in perpetual committee along with the author (he being in the chair). They are always considering and discussing amongst themselves, and are never to be caught off-guard. The effect of this builds up to an atmosphere of priggishness, and the reader's sympathy is destroyed, especially a reader whom two centuries of time separate from the manners and fashions of the letter writers. What was Richardson's triumph during his lifetime has since become a treachery to his genius; for he had genius. He was too completely the spokesman of his age, that representative figure who is bound to create a school, a clique, and in the end to be caricatured by his unwitting disciples.

Today, we have to read *Pamela*, *Clarissa Harlowe*, and *Sir Charles Grandison* (if indeed we can read this last book!) bearing in mind what had gone before. Without that historical appreciation (an activity which it is the whole purpose of this essay to emphasize) we shall not see what new element Richardson brought to the novel, and through the novel, to the art of life and the advancement

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of civilization. His close sensibility added poetry to the hourly traffic of human minds in contact. He thus *aerated* the heavy processes of the animal world, which had hitherto been almost enough, even for the tellers of the medieval romances. The physical rewards of love are always current coin, as also those of hate. Sex, battle, the caress of the chamber and of the sword, these are the currency of a primitive society, or one falling into decay. The violence with which these demonstrate themselves is immediately accepted by even the dullest persons. But take human activities a step or two higher, among the foothills of the mind, and the pressure is at once refined. Smaller symbols represent such larger significances. A word can become a blow, a glance a declaration of utmost passion. Everything is set afresh, on a more intimate stage, amid a furniture so delicate that every movement has to be deliberated for fear of some bull-like clumsiness. Moral vision takes the place of appetite. It was this achievement that made Samuel Johnson say of his contemporary Richardson that he 'enlarged the knowledge of human nature, and taught the passions to move at the command of virtue'. He said of *Clarissa Harlowe* that 'it was the first book in the world for the knowledge it displays of the human heart'. Today, we find that virtue, and that human heart as Richardson envisaged it, somewhat mechanically posed, and meanly explored. From this, we suspect that the pusillanimousness to which I have already referred, is not due entirely to a change in moral values. It lurks in Richardson's character. In spite of being a husband and a father, he remained an old maid. As he grew older and more and more famous (for his books captivated the whole civilized world) he withdrew to the centre of a circle of adoring women, most of them blue-stockings, and there he lived a little tea-party existence in which the dropping of a crumb was a solecism that shook his pampered sensibility. He became almost as contemptible as Horace Walpole, that other hot-house plant. But from what coarse weather these creatures of the age were sheltering, and drawing

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with them a world of aspirants towards a refinement of mind and spirit!

Clarissa Harlowe is another tale of the eternal attempt upon a woman's chastity. But here it ends in tragedy, for the man who makes the attempt is not an amiable creature following his leisurely appetite, but a violent villain who cheats and finally rapes the decent woman who would have been more than content to give him what he wanted, since she was ready to love him in spite of his brutality. These male characters in Richardson's books are always unconvincing. Sir Charles Grandison, whom he intended to be a man of virtue, is a more insufferable prig even than Meredith's Sir Willoughby Patterne, the hero of *The Egoist*. Mr B. in *Pamela* and Lovelace in *Clarissa Harlowe*, are presented by the author rather as a house-proud woman would deal with a clumsy dog which had bounded into her drawing-room while she was holding an at-home. There is an air of superiority about it all. This, as well as the good qualities of Richardson, has been conveyed down the years, and that element of preciosity, of exclusiveness and 'highbrowism', in which the less attractive feminine instincts are given full feline play (at their worst when perverted by male imitators), is to be found in the fiction of our own time.

All that is on the debit side. But how much is there which is positive gain! I have tried to show that; especially the quality in Richardson's books which gave to the world, for the first time, a sense of stillness, of leisure, so that the seas of human life could calm down, and become a smooth mirror of the interior constellations of the mind, showing their intricate motions, whose mathematics were following a pattern not of this earth with its blunt representations, but of the figures of the soul striving after infinity.

Such people as Richardson, with their assumptions of a faculty for higher criticism, always and immediately attract irritated critics. The most enraging phrase in the Gospels is: 'I thank thee that I am not as other men are.' This element in Richardson asked for trouble. He got it,

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and from a critic who quickly proved to be of so much greater stature that the criticism was lost in the creative faculty springing out of it.

Henry Fielding (1707-54) was the younger son of a younger son of a noble family from the West Country. He thus came from a different social order than that in which Richardson was born. He went to school at Eton, and studied law at Leyden. Returning to England, he had to earn his living, and attempted to do so by writing for the stage. He half succeeded, but had to augment this pursuit by following his profession of the law. He became a magistrate, and finally sat at Bow Street, in actuality the head of the English police, such as it was. He did much to clean up the life of the streets, and he paved the way for Peel's reforms in the following century.

The pursuit of these administrative activities brought him into contact with every aspect of society. There was no detail of the realities of life with which he was left unfamiliar. This long continued experience acted upon a temperament given to a genial scepticism, augmenting it and deepening it into a habit of mind whose tolerances were Shakespearean. Fielding learned to make allowance for every form of human weakness except Pharisaism, the only one which Richardson condoned. And again unlike the introspective Richardson, his interests ranged over everything that moved under the sun. Given a sign of life in any object, Fielding drew near to watch it, and to enjoy what he saw.

The effect of these habits of temperament upon his work was to make it multifarious, but not quite in the Shakespearean way, where the contacts were both wide and deep, agonized with poetic sympathy. Fielding's far-ranging attention was more matter-of-fact, practical, worldly-wise and genial. In this he was like two novelists who came after him, Tolstoi and Arnold Bennett, both of whom wrote masterpieces in Fielding's manner. Like his followers, he was a man of prose, in mind as well as in medium. That is what makes him a master of the art of the

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novel, for in his hands it became a massive, middle-of-the-road vehicle in which all mankind could travel, at some time or other, or at some stage of the mortal journey between the cradle and the grave. Beyond those two points Fielding did not travel. But how intimately, and with what amazing understanding, he knew the geography of that journey.

Fielding's career as a playwright came to an end because his satires against the political jobbery sanctioned by the Prime Minister Robert Walpole became too savage for that tough old opportunist to bear. Walpole passed a Bill through the Commons in 1737 which became the Licensing Act, a statute that still causes people of the theatre to grind their teeth in public, though in fact it saves them a great deal of trouble over the dangers of the law of libel, and the activities of the common informer. Having written some sixteen or more plays, Fielding turned to contemplate the success of Richardson. Through his hatred for cant, he saw with some distaste the dubious virtue of Pamela's prolonged efforts to sell her chastity at the highest price. It occurred to him that if he created a brother for Pamela, made him also a household servant, and set a lascivious female employer in the place of Mr B., the resulting drama might be amusing, and would show up the flaws in Richardson's moral fussing with the trappings of orthodox conduct.

But Fielding reckoned without his own creative genius. The satire begins as such, and for the opening chapters it is subdued to that purpose. But in the Second Book, the now immortal Parson Adams steps to the fore, on his way to London to sell his collected sermons to a publisher. From that moment the adventures multiply, winding their way in and out in a fashion so ingenious that the reader would be lost in admiration for the plot alone, were there nothing else to be enchanted by. But there is much else, rich, human stuff piling up to climaxes such as had never before been encountered in any picaresque novel, not even *Don Quixote*. For always Fielding's training as a

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dramatist served him, clarifying situation, and giving significance to every incident, so that what happens at the present moment has a bearing upon what shall happen later, each action playing to and fro as twofold commentary through the irony of events. It is no exaggeration to claim that Fielding is one of the greatest ironists in European literature. He is so much greater than Swift because he is healthy and normal, whereas Swift went about the world with a fleck of foam upon his lips.

Joseph Andrews appeared in 1742, two years after *Pamela*. It was immediately successful, and for reasons which the author probably foresaw in his preface to the book. There he said that 'life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous', and he set out to be that accurate observer, bringing to the task his exuberant vitality, his vast common sense, and his discipline in commanding and presenting facts.

Those positive qualities, vitality, common sense, a command of facts and the faculty for marshalling them, are the powers behind the book with which Fielding followed up his first success. *Tom Jones* is one of the great novels of the world, as *War and Peace*, *Père Goriot*, *Middlemarch*, *David Copperfield*, *Vanity Fair* and *The Old Wives' Tale* are great. I have selected these examples because in all of them the predominant feature is not a literary or even a poetic one. They are great because of their vast content of common humanity. Such books are seminal forces just as life itself is. Readers and other writers go to them and feed there, finding a vicarious experience so faithful to reality that it becomes confused with the reader's and writer's private life, and acts upon their characters accordingly. To have read *Tom Jones* is to have gone out into the world, shedding prejudices, gaucheries, parochialisms and the claustral fears of the untravelled novice of life. It is a maturing experience, one that gives us balance, insight into human nature, tolerance of its weaknesses and a larger gratitude for its strengths. What other great writers have praised *Tom Jones*, and acknowledged their debt!

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Gibbon said of it that this 'exquisite picture of human manners, will outlive the palace of the Escorial and the imperial eagle of the House of Austria'. We use the epithet *exquisite* somewhat differently today, applying it to sensitive and over-nervously wrought work such as that of Mr E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, rather than to the massive and masculine novels which present the world as it is, and not as it is apprehended by a certain personality.

The importance of Fielding, from an historical point of view, is that he is the first writer to focus the novel in such a way that it brought the whole world *as we see it*, within the scope of this now rapidly maturing literary form. And those critics who deny that Fielding plunged into the depths and the solitudes of life, where so much of our human experience lies, are deceived by the range and the teeming activity of his work, the speed and pattern of his plots. It is like denying that the intimacies of personal drama can take place at midday in Piccadilly. They can, and they do. It is possible to be alone, when reading *Tom Jones*, to meditate there and to test the susceptibilities of feeling, of conscience, as freely as we do when inhabiting the world of Dostoevski, or that of Stendhal. What deceives such critics is that Fielding observes and comments on his observations with such speed, one fact coming upon the heels of another, it might be psychological, it might be actual, and all offered so lavishly and in the ordinary course, without the author thinking it worth further analysis. In that he is like nature itself; a field full of flowers, any one of their millions capable of being isolated and studied for its intimate beauties and distinction, and no two alike, except in their universal likeness, which covers all differences, just as the great charity of Fielding itself covers all the differences in human nature.

It is that spirit of all-pervading charity, expressing itself in a genial but vigorous compassion, which enabled Fielding to bring to the novel, for the first time, a completely dispassionate observing mind. The result was the appearance in fiction of real human beings, in light and

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shadow, in weakness and strength, acting and thinking and feeling as you and I and all other flesh and blood mortals behave during our lifelong conflict with the spirit that inhabits us. We are sinners, we are saints; and usually we are a neutral emulsion of the two. So are Tom Jones, and his lady Sophia, and Squire Allworthy, and the rest of them, people who have commanded the interest of millions of readers, and the professional praise, through imitation, of all those hosts of writers who have come after him. Scott, Hazlitt, Lamb, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Dickens and Thackeray, George Eliot, and Meredith; these are a few of the great figures in literature who are his debtors.

Tom Jones was published in 1749. It had been preceded by three volumes of *Miscellanies*, a fantasy called *A Journey from this World to the Next*, and a savage tale of the underworld, *Jonathan Wild*, written in the manner of Defoe, with a touch of the desperate gaiety of *The Beggar's Opera*. This book was founded on the life of the notorious highwayman. Two years passed, during which he was busy with his work on the Bench. Its contacts, and its revelations of the social sores of the English scene during the eighteenth century, chastened his muse. His last book, *Amelia*, appeared in 1751. Its colour is more sombre than that of *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. The satire has deepened into irony, bitter and implacable. Through it, there emerges a new spirit of gentleness, which shows after all how much he had in common with his old adversary Richardson. The book is more intimate, domestic, and less *robustious* than its predecessors. Fielding had been sobered by his close contact with appalling suffering, and all the baseness as well as the nobility of human nature as revealed in the court where he presided. No doubt too, the death of his first wife, with whom he had been perfectly happy (he portrayed her both in Sophia and in Amelia, two gracious examples of womanhood), softened his masculine temper. *Amelia* is not on the epic scale of *Tom Jones*. It is more to be compared with *The Vicar of Wakefield*, as a picture of marriage, and all that it means of endurance,

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sacrifice, and gentle understanding. In this book Fielding begins to sort out the elements of society in a way that prepares for the great Christian and humanitarian reforms of the following century. There is thus a tract-like quality in *Amelia* foreign to his other books. The virtue of meekness is shown, for the first time in fiction so far as I know, in the character of the gentle wife Amelia. And her virtue is demonstrated against a background of Hogarthian horrors (with prison scenes in abundance), the wicked smart set of Georgian London, and a crowd of tipsters, quacks, bumbles, who were later to walk bodily into the fiction of Dickens. Debt, too, in the Dickensian manner, becomes a principal factor, dropping its insidious poison to destroy the weak and to exhaust the strong characters. Here Fielding shows the importance of a sense of responsibility, and how in the long run love can only truly show itself by assuming that burden. Romantic protestations and shows cast aside, love emerges as a faculty for quiet endurance and a faithfulness in the face of every betrayal and provocation. Here, finally, is realism at its truest and most significant; not the cold-blooded realism of Defoe, nor that multiplication of it which was to overload so much of the fiction of the nineteenth century. Utter honesty of soul; that is the quality which sums up the genius of Henry Fielding. And it is a power so rare, and so strong, that once demonstrated, it can never be forgotten or evaded. It is the basis of all religious and moral activity, as it is of all theories of art and aesthetic fashions. It outlives them all.

The third of the four great limbs of the tree of fiction was Tobias Smollett (1721-71). Like Fielding, he was of more gentle birth than Richardson, for he came of a family of Scottish landowners near Loch Lomond. Being, like Fielding, the younger son of a younger son (with a mother disapproved of by the head of the family) he was faced with the prospect of earning his living. He was apprenticed to a doctor in Glasgow, where he also studied at the university. His natural disposition was a bilious one. His

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temper was sharp, irritable, and these characteristics were aggravated by poor health. He had a gift for quarrelling with his family, his landlords and landladies, all foreigners, theatre owners (his early failure as a dramatist rankled for the rest of his life), publishers and public.

His nature was confirmed in its oddities by the next course in his affairs. He went to sea as a ship's surgeon, and took part in the Expedition to Carthage, and to the West Indies. Students of nautical history will appreciate what he saw and suffered. The prison scenes depicted by Fielding and Hogarth are paradisaical in comparison. In the West Indies he found a bride whose dowry enabled him to return to London and take a house in Downing Street, where he set up in practice.

But he could not shake off his native temperament. He was obsessed by that suspicious attitude of the northerner towards the southerner, exhibited by so many men who come to London and conquer it, but remain secretly unconvinced of their superior personal powers. Carlyle was like this, and we may even see a trace of this temper in Mr Priestley's work. Smollett had failed to get his first work, a play, taken by any manager in London. His adventures at sea had been within the field of one of our major marine disasters. These setbacks fostered a rancorous mood that became a habit tincturing the whole of his writings. That mood could not disguise the powerful intellectual grasp of his mind, or the fundamental moral stability of his character. Stand away from him, to avoid the porcupine quills, and you will begin to appreciate those other and more important qualities. His most marked literary gift is a firmness of touch and attack. He is a wonderful story-teller for that reason. He knows what he wants to say and he says it, abruptly, uncompromisingly.

His first book was *Roderick Random* (1748, the year in which *Clarissa Harlowe* appeared). What a contrast to Richardson's work! And what a world Smollett portrays! Here is no loving kindness, no genial satire masking the

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smile of indulgence, as in Fielding; no patient penetration down to motive and sensitive reactions, as in Richardson. Smollett was an aggrieved man. He grumbled, he cursed his fellow-creatures as fools and worse. He showed friendship and love to be thin disguises for self-interest. He assumed that fraud, chicanery, and lust are what is to be expected in our dealings with each other. And we see those motive powers acting upon his work, to impede its architectural growth, inducing a dissociation of incident, a lack of fertile contact between his characters. Each goes his or her own way, and they blunder into one another like those little electrically-propelled motor-cars one sees at a modern fair. They are tough, insensitive individuals, too concerned with their own affairs and their own inhibitions to be trustful enough to take on the long-term policies of love and the larger plans of a civilized life.

Such is the psychological fabric of Smollett's work. That is not so original, for an angry contempt towards society had already shown itself in the English novel through the books of the Elizabethan prose-men (see Chapter III). What was new in *Roderick Random* was the actual subject-matter. Smollett was the first author to write a tale about the sea and life aboard ship. In all his subsequent work there appeared this valuable element, freshness of theme. He had an odd, factual interest in what was happening around him, and he recounted it with zest, that zest which misanthropes so often discover towards circumstances, since they cannot vent it on people. In choosing first the sea as an object of this impersonal enthusiasm, he became the pioneer in a department of English letters which has flourished in the most lavish way ever since. *Roderick Random*, the first sea-tale, rich with the vocabulary of the fore-castle and the quarter-deck, came at a time when British interests were spreading all over the world, carving the oceans with British keels. The theme was contemporary and popular, with the result that *Roderick Random* was an instant success. The reader should

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note on what a basis of brutality the tale begins. The hero recounts how at school, under a tyrannical master, he 'was flogged for having narrowly escaped from drowning by the sinking of a ferry-boat on which I was a passenger; another time for having recovered from a bruise occasioned by a horse and cart running over me; a third time for being bit by a baker's dog'. Note the terseness of that prose; how uncompromising it is. No British writer more effectually called a spade a spade than did Smollett. 'Being bit by a baker's dog'; the experience is precise, definite, sharp.

Roderick continues his adventures in this astringent fashion, and the series of events (rather than a developing plot) that follows is a book in the pure picaresque vein, modelled on le Sage's *Gil Blas*, and on Scarron's *Roman Comique*, rather than on the masterpiece of all in this manner, *Don Quixote*. The reader needs a strong stomach to swallow the details of what happened aboard ship; the fevers, the floggings, the battles, mutinies, discipline, and vice. Roderick was befriended by his uncle, Tom Bowling, who came forward from time to time when fortune and the luck of the road were too incredibly weighted against the hero. The report of the sea battle of Carthage in 1741 is an eye-witness account, for Smollett was a surgeon's mate aboard the *Cumberland* during the engagement.

There is more sea-salt in the next novel, *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), in which we meet more brutal schoolmasters and ships' captains, though the now famous Commodore Trunnion is one whose bark is worse than his bite. His life on shore, after retirement from the sea, has set a fashion in the drawing of these nautical characters, barnacle-encrusted.

'He does not live like any other Christian landman, but keeps a garrison in his house, as if he were in the midst of enemies, and makes his servants turn out in the night, watch and watch, as he calls it, all the year

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round. His habitation is defended by a ditch, over which he has laid a drawbridge, and planted his courtyard with paterroes continually loaded with shot. He won't suffer his maids to lie in the garrison, but turns them into an outhouse every night, before the watch is set.'

The reducing of this amazing old salt through the machinations of a female, Mistress Grizzle, is a piece of comedy which writers never tire of imitating.

Tristram Shandy is indebted to it in the scenes between Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman. Dickens returned again and again to pillage there. Indeed, his debt to Smollett is incalculable, both for the management of a theme, and the prose style to carry it.

At the end of his life, with ill-health at last reducing his roaring temperament, Smollett retired to Leghorn, and there in his last days he wrote his best book, *Humphrey Clinker*. It is his best because it is purged of rancour. This purification gives the true character of the author full play, and reveals him in his sagacity, wide range of interests, intellectual grasp of all aspects of life, and lovable oddity. For Smollett is lovable, if you do not mind having your head bitten off. His sense of comedy, with its sting removed by the approaching serenity of death, plays over a group of characters centred round an old country squire (given to hypochondria) who is seeking health at various watering-places in England and Scotland, accompanied by his family and retainers. Smollett turns to the epistolary form, imitating Richardson, and he uses it to show how the same events, places, and persons are seen and interpreted in totally different terms by several personalities, the writers of the letters. Age, youth, master and servant, man and woman, the educated and the ignorant, the active and the lame, the contrasts of view are endless, and they are posed so cunningly that each is a commentary on the others, making a crossfire of critical analysis maintained in a spirit of levity that never falls flat.

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The book is one of the most readable in English fiction, and the eccentrics in it, such as the Lieutenant Obadiah Lismahago (a kind of patched and even more broken Don Quixote), and Mistress Tabitha Bramble, the Squire's sister, a vinegarish old maid who finally fastens on Lismahago and to everybody's surprise converts him from a cantankerous old bachelor into a happy bridegroom, all such characters, as also the straight ones (the Squire Bramble, his natural son Clinker, his niece and nephew Liddy and Jerry Melford, the young man 'Wilson' who loves Liddy and follows her faithfully and still incognito on the eupeptic tour), these make up a community of people that is a constant delight to the reader. Hazlitt was right in calling this book 'the most pleasant gossiping novel that ever was written'.

Smollett's success in his own day was complete. His brutality and coarseness were less offensive in the eighteenth century than they are today. Our cruelties and social vices are colder and more discreet, and our references to such matters are in a minor key. Smollett's activity was abnormal, and it was reflected in his prose style. What it lacked in grace it made up in agility, and in it he found a perfect medium for straight story-telling. Dickens found this out early in his career, for *Pickwick Papers* is heavily indebted to *Humphrey Clinker*, and possibly still more to Smollett's earlier *Sir Launcelot Greaves* (the first novel ever to be serialized, in 1760). This book was written while the author was engaged upon translating *Don Quixote*, and it is a light-hearted reflection of the Spanish masterpiece. It contains scenes where a candidate is canvassing before an election for Parliament, and at once the similar scenes in *Pickwick* are brought to mind.

Comparing Smollett with Richardson and Fielding, shows him to stand at the extreme of external interests; often brutally and bluntly so. Richardson was his opposite, all introspection and feminine sensibility. Fielding walked between them, on the centre of the road, able to appreciate each and to work in both manners. There was in Smollett a

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sardonic quality from which Byron, who admired him, must have taken something towards the building up of that elaborate façade which he presented to the world. This may, indeed, be a Scottish characteristic, for we find it in the work today of Eric Linklater, another Scot, whom I would also call a member of Smollett's literary family.

Finally, in considering this quartette of giants who emerged at the command of the spirit of the age, we come to the work of Laurence Sterne (1713-68). Sterne was the great-grandson of an Archbishop of York, and he appears to have used this family distinction to obtain for himself a living in the North Riding as soon as he had taken Orders. This was in a village near York, and his only professional advance during the rest of his life was to change from that village to another, the living of Coxwold, a remote spot even today, set among the ruined abbeys of the North Riding, apparently in a timeless world.

Perhaps the leisureliness of this existence led Sterne to his experiments with the time-spirit in literature. Whatever may have been the cause, that which he produced was something both unique and far in advance of its time. He might be called the first Impressionist. That is to say, he deliberately cast aside the props of a rational progression, in which time measures out the plot and determines cause and effect. In his most famous work (and he is known only for two books) *Tristram Shandy* (begun in 1759 and continued *seriatim* for the rest of his life) Sterne introduced a method of working by means of sensory suggestion. Such a method must, sooner or later, become controlled by sentiment, that is, the fleeting emotion, the momentary reaction to immediate experience. This led to two predominant characteristics in his work. The first was its dependence upon physical aspects and associations (in this he was Goyaesque, with a mania about oddities of form and appearance). The second was its recoil from this dependence, in moods perhaps of disgust and fear, and an escapist effort to follow purely verbal channels of suggestion. It was the first that made him father of im-

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pressionism. It was the second that made him father of the still more remote school of literary art in which the main interest of the writer is in his medium and only secondarily in life itself. The Elizabethans, drunk upon the new wine or their wonderful language, began the habit, and we see it as it affects Shakespeare in the early plays and the sonnets. Ideas spring from epithets, and these again are embodied in words which create still further images that fecundate like green-fly, gradually sucking the life out of the stem on which they are parasitic. But in themselves, they create marvellous if morbid beauties. So it was with Sterne, one of the great masters of English prose style, whose habits were copied with varying degrees of disaster, and occasional success, by hordes of followers, most of them verbal fops and poseurs, brothers of Sir Andrew Aguecheek.

Sterne had been living in obscurity for twenty years when he began to write *Tristram Shandy*. Two volumes of the book appeared in 1760 and took London by storm. He went there and found himself famous, and his clerical poverty at least mitigated. Four more volumes were published during the following year, but his health breaking down, he went to Paris and found his fame had gone in advance. He toured about in France and Italy for two years, during which he wrote his shorter but perhaps more perfect book, *A Sentimental Journey*. The ninth and last volume of *Tristram Shandy* was issued in 1767, the conclusion being due solely to his death in the following year.

Much of what Sterne did was deliberate. He revolted against the massive sense of proportion imposed upon the novel by his contemporary Fielding. With his amazing cleverness, he inverted the form, standing time upon its head, and watching what the effect upon the realm of reason would be. The result was to slow up life's usual procession. With jerks and jolts, the long train of cause and effect came to a standstill, to be pushed on piecemeal only when the author wished to contemplate a further link in the inert chain of circumstance. Thus the hero, Tristram

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Shandy, is not born until we get to Book Three! And even that momentous event is largely theoretical, part of an experiment which the author is carrying out with the grandfather clock and the connubial habits of the elder Mr Shandy. The dissertations and excursions, due entirely to verbal suggestions, are unlimited. One of them, the famous Slawkenburgius chapter, is a good example both of this pun-originated device and of the other physical obsession which has made me compare Sterne with Goya. In this chapter he talks about noses. It is a nightmare, in spite of its comic and satiric bravura. The dreadful elasticity of the imaginary physical deformities takes hold upon our imaginations and leads us to a surrealist world where meaning can become the victim of any whim or insane mania. The reader will see at once what effect such experiments have had in stimulating later writers, especially those given to vagary of temperament, due to some quirk of nature or distortion wrought by the accident of events. Proust, who performed wonders in this matter of deranging the time element, would have been able to do so under the monitorship of Sterne, even had there been no Bergson to give philosophic sanction to the practice.

Sterne's experiments with words and time, equivalent in another art with the adventures of Monet and Renoir in the use of paint and light, carried the medium of English prose still further towards its present-day vastness of scope. His vocabulary was enormous, and he used it consciously to fill the vacuum so often created by his mischievous tricks played upon the time-spirit. He was the first novelist to be aware of *duration* as a positive factor, influencing living folk and playing a part in the definition of their characters. In his hands it became a critic of human nature, and fundamentally a pessimistic one, since number, the source of duration, is always inimical to individuality, and therefore to the dignity of man. Everything continued long enough becomes inert. 'Larger and Larger' as an aim (so frequent in our con-

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temporary life), leads without fail to Totalitarianism and the Ultimate Vulgarity, and finally to bursting point and extinction. Civilization, with the arts that make it, cannot be blown up with idiot or puerile breath like a child's balloon. The general effect, therefore, of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* is a depressing one, in spite of the terms of comedy in which they are couched. We find the same effect on reading *Ulysses*, by Sterne's disciple James Joyce. Here again the verbal elephantiasis induces nightmare in the reader, and what might be permissible passing remarks are inflated into indecencies that send sniggering echoes round the universe which the authors have almost emptied of all moral significance.

Such is the fruit of sentimentalism, and the critic can ask himself if all satire, with its debilitating results, is not a secondary condition of sentimentality and self-pity, the expression of writers with a personal grudge against society, people determined to get their blow in first because they are so afraid of being hurt. But there is a value in these people who are irritated by the rose-petals under the mattress of life. They offer a corrective to the massive generalizations of the more masculine, realistic writers who 'see life whole' and thus become somewhat freezingly impersonal. Sterne was a master of the art of being personal, and his complaints about that irksome rose-petal become verbal symphonies whose music will never grow stale.

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There came a lull which, seen from the distance of two centuries, has a deceptive appearance of emptiness. The shade cast by the preceding four giants is perhaps too heavy, and we tend to overlook the millions of seedlings that sprang up under their boughs, only to die a quick death. But they survived long enough to provide a dense undergrowth of fiction on which the new reading public could browse with long-eared appetite. That public emerged suddenly, for the habit of reading had filtered down through society. The middle decades of the eighteenth century saw the establishment of the lending library, an institution which was to play an important part, perhaps a too important part, on the nature and form of the English novel. Fifty years later, it had drilled writers into spinning out their work to fill the 'three-decker' form, a tumidity to be regretted even in the work of such masters as Scott and Dickens. It has become a national institution, without which novelists in England would starve. Today, it enables them to augment their livelihood as journalists, or other form of professional workers, and sometimes it serves to recommend a particular novel so intimately to the public that the book begins to sell in the shops.

This institution was born of the need of the moment. The success of Richardson and Fielding especially, had awakened the booksellers (who were at that time also the publishers) to the fact that the novel was a potential source of wealth. They proceeded to exploit it, rather as the settlers on the prairies of America were exploiting, and

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exhausting, so much virgin soil. Hacks were commissioned by the dozen, to produce works of fiction reflecting the mood and the fashion of the day, plots being stolen from the recent masters, characters imitated in a dilute form, and society scandals dished up under thin disguises. The commercial novel had arrived, and from that time the true novelist, working as a conscientious and sensitive artist, has had always to contend against this heavy tide of contemporary fiction produced to fill the idle hours of the library subscriber. The conventions of this tide, always pulling behind the eager explorations of the truly creative writers, set up, and still maintain, a time-lag in the general appreciation of original work. Writers were quickly aware of this danger, and several of them began to satirize this state of affairs, and to point out the dangers and debilities which it was engendering. Chief amongst these critics was Sheridan, who had some ironic warnings to offer in his play *The Rivals*.

The flood of fiction that followed is not worth aesthetic consideration here. To the historian it is useful, for it reflects the changing and developing social order. As art it is negligible, with few exceptions, but it shows vividly the shift of viewpoint from the aristocratic toughness and adventurousness to the mercantile, middle-class quest for safety and decorum. Domestic sanctity was to become again an ideal, and to remain so until its abuse in Victorian times (with the tyrannical father a national spectre) led to a revolt such as we see in action today (exaggerated by a shift in economic responsibilities and conditions).

Life had been so brutal, so callous, during the splendours of the seventeenth century, that a reaction was bound to follow. It took the form during the eighteenth century of this domestic seclusion in literature and manners. Polite life became a porcelain affair, aided by the wealth flowing in from the fabulous East, which was being so vigorously plundered by the Nabobs. Civilization reached new heights, with an emphasis upon grace of

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form and manners. The letters of that sweet but pathetic poet William Cowper show to what extent sensibility could reach. He 'sang the sofa', and established thereby a complete world of proportionate values in miniature which reflect a larger universe as it were through a genius of timidity. A school of novelists sprang from that experiment, their practice being *multum in parvo*, one which lent itself instantly to the English characteristic of understatement, shyness, fastidious reserve in the face of outrageous circumstance.

So successful was this attitude that it served almost to cover the powerful forces thrusting up out of the darkness of illiteracy, the forces of the dispossessed who were to find a first spokesman in Dickens and to overflow the world in our time, submerging so much that is traditional and beautiful within a privileged field.

For the first time, perhaps, in the history of English life (at least since the departure of the Romans) ease and humdrumness became a frequent condition of daily life. From this security, and the resultant boredom, men and women needed to be rescued by a proxy of danger and adventure. This need was catered for by the booksellers and their hack writers, who turned out a flood of fiction which revived, in suitably adapted form, the romantic tale, of knights, ladies in distress, and all the paraphernalia of chivalry. But it was even more sophisticated than the romantic revival in fiction which appeared in the seventeenth century (see Chapter V). It was now heavily theatrical, and lacked the restraint of humour. This ridiculous confectionery was based on the chimerical idea of 'the noble savage'; the illusion that primitive man was healthy, virtuous, and to be imitated, and that to be near to nature was to be nearer to a state of beatitude. This idea has always haunted humanity. We find it in our individual hearts today, in spite of the broadcast teachings of science and the discoveries of the anthropologists. We cannot eradicate the Garden of Eden from our imaginations, and perhaps it is a blessing that we cannot. For with-

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out this platonic conception of some archetypal perfection that has once been in existence our feeble will is unable to project an equal state of perfection as an aim for the future both of the individual and of society. We live by our mirages, and in the end make them the very substance of our purpose, by which we command the earth.

But when the dream becomes self-conscious, fanciful and over-indulged, it works like a drug. So did this fiction which swamped the literary market in the eighteenth century. It took two forms, the Gothic and the Oriental, and in the Gothic it was the more outrageous because it followed a more spurious model. This was the novel written by Horace Walpole, the dilettante, highbrow son of that tough old bull, the Prime Minister who believed that 'every man has his price'. Walpole was the flower of that artificial age. Eton, King's College, Cambridge, sojourns in France and Italy, prepared him for the exquisite and fastidious life of connoisseurship and letters which followed. He sat in Parliament for nearly thirty years, but that was a minor matter which he never took seriously; or rather it never took him seriously. He was, perhaps, the first great snob in the modern conception of that word. By intellectual assumption, by manner of speech, gesture, environment, by fastidious *ennuis*, he set the mode for all the snobbery of culture that has followed.

Walpole was a copious writer, but he produced only one novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). From that time ruined castles, gibbous moons, graveyards, ghosts, and owl-cries became the fashion. Fundamentally, Walpole was a coarse, insensitive egoist, and only this highly flavoured pabulum could stir his emotions. The sweetness and simplicity of normal life, with the responsibilities entailed, left him peevish and cantankerous. His novel was like the Gothic house which he built at vast expense (his income came from sinecures and a share of his father's pillage) at Twickenham. Both were pseudo, what today we call 'Wardour Street', or 'Hollywood'. The plot of his

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novel is a rigmarole of usurpations, marriages of convenience, gigantic portents and ghostly appearances, conflicts in caves, trysts before altars, retirements of sinners to convents, and all the rest of these stock fancies which have been used again and again. The vogue reached its height round the turn of the century, and even well into the nineteenth century we see its influence on European fiction. Victor Hugo's novels, like his monochrome drawings, are inflated by it. The plots of the novels by the great Victorians reveal this tincture.

Though Walpole set the mode, it is to be doubted that the underlying idea came from him. It was something larger, and not to be contained in Walpole's character. Indeed, it was one of the many symptoms of the huge unrest which was stirring the mind of mankind. The revolt against authority, in every walk of life, was growing and being systematized and united. The cult of the 'noble savage' was more than a piece of nostalgic longing for the past, a desire to creep back into the womb of time to an impossible state of innocence. It was a denial of the principle of 'original sin', a theory on which the Church had founded its dogmas and wielded its discipline amidst the anarchy into which Europe had sunk after the downfall of the Roman rule. Rousseau was the real spokesman of that revolt. He was the first great sentimentalist and proclaimer of the sanctity of personal feeling. His novel *Julie, or La Nouvelle Héloïse*, was translated in 1762, the year after its appearance in France, and it served to intensify the process of psychological analysis in fiction, already begun by Richardson. This aspect of the romantic revolt was, oddly enough, carried still further by a Catholic priest, the Abbé Prévost. He was a Benedictine, whose obedience was not dissimilar to that of the painter Lippo Lippi, his clerical life being one long escapade, as it were from the convent windows, into amorous adventure which he converted into his art. Not much survives of Prévost's prolific writings, except to the scholar. But one short novel stands out amongst the greatest of all European tales. *Manon*

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Lescaut is the last volume of seven otherwise somewhat tedious books called *The Adventures and Memoirs of a Man of Quality*, in which much of his own emotional life was portrayed. *Manon Lescaut* suddenly takes fire, and burns with the flame of a pure passion, to become a sort of incandescence of all love tales since the beginning of time. Underlying it is the idea of renunciation and self-oblation, a religious conception, but the worship, the utter *caritas*, is removed from the Christian altar to that of Aphrodite, the queen of all capricious gifts and pleasures, the earthy goddess whose beauty is a drug and a destroyer. The temperament which could conceive this abandonment drove Prévost out of the cloister from time to time, and he usually escaped to England, where he made acquaintance with the novels of Richardson, and translated them into French. He also wrote a novel with an English setting, if his wild *mises en scènes* can ever be said to have a precise setting. *Cleveland* (translated in 1734) again shows the triumph of passion over reason and even over pain. The hero is an illegitimate son of Cromwell, and after a secretive childhood in a cave (to escape persecution by his father!) he carries his unfortunate destiny round the world (including the New World) in pursuit of the object of his love. The plot grows complicated, and we find *Cleveland* finally embroiled in an affair with a girl who turns out to be his own daughter. This carrying of the authority of passion to the very confines of hitherto permitted relationships was a characteristic feature of the romantic revolt. Toying with the ideals of incest had a symbolical purpose, for it served to bolster up the intrepidity of the rebels by giving them the appearance of association with the classical mythology and way of life. Science being still too young and inadequate to fill the gap, Olympus was invoked as a substitute for Calvary.

But all this was by inference, and probably only half conscious. The immediate effect of Prévost's novels was to supply the scenery out of which the English novelists, led

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by Horace Walpole, were to select their caves, castles, catacombs, abbeys, and all the rest of the pasteboard stock of spurious romance. Outstanding amongst these practitioners of the Gothic were Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) and Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818). These are almost forgotten, the rest are forgotten absolutely.

Ann Radcliffe had a streak of genius, and it showed itself in the creation of atmosphere. She could do the most amazing things in this line, with the aid of a rusty dagger, an exhumed corpse, a ball at midnight, a veiled picture, a forbidden door. She could excite a feeling of intense dramatic anticipation in the reader, and maintain it through the most incredible events and the manipulation of the most unlikely characters. The effect of her skill was, and is today, hypnotic. It might be said that almost she was a medium, for transmitting emotions and sensations more vast than her nature warranted. The work of Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge was directly affected by her genius. The only comparable force is that of the boy poet Chatterton, whose death at the age of seventeen robbed the Romantic Revival of one who might have become an outstanding novelist. Ann Radcliffe had little more experience of the world, for she married and settled down to a happy domestic life. The scenes of horror, fear and violence which she presented in her novels were complete figments, spun out of air. She did not even believe in them, for her practice was to explain away, from a rational point of view, the illusions which her *doppelgänger* self had created. This habit has destroyed the authenticity of her work, and it is not read today. But it served its purpose in bringing an element of sublimity and awe-inspiring mystery into the *setting* of a tale, and thus making hitherto inanimate nature play a positive part in the drama which the mere humans would otherwise be unable to fulfil.

Of her many books, only *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) survives today, and that is due perhaps less to its superior merits than to the fact that it was parodied by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*.

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Matthew Lewis was a wealthy young man in the Diplomatic Service. He was thus very differently placed, beginning his literary career with considerable sophistication. Working in Germany, he came under the influence of Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther* (1774), the novel which made Europe weep, and set the mould for the melancholy hero tinged with evil, a figure who stalked through the gloomy scenes of Mrs Radcliffe's books, and emerged into real life as Lord Byron. But Lewis emphasized more the physical and diabolical aspect, and his first and only surviving book, *Ambrosio, or The Monk* (known now by the latter name) is an unrestrained essay in the macabre, with the young author setting out to make our flesh creep. It is pure, Teutonic melodrama. His Monk is another Faust, who out of spiritual pride is seduced by Satan into committing a number of sensual crimes which bring him into the courts of the Inquisition. He sells his soul to Satan in order to be rescued from the exercise of justice, and in the end Satan lets him down (literally!) by flying with his victim high into the air and dropping him over a rocky landscape. It is crude enough, but it suited the mood of the time, and *The Monk* was widely read and imitated by writers incapable of snatching the higher values from the books of Ann Radcliffe.

Two other books in this kind, which take us into the nineteenth century, have to be mentioned, because they were also links with other aspects of the romantic revolt. *Melmoth the Wanderer*, by Charles Robert Maturin (1782–1824), carried the cult of horror into the field of sensibility and subtle analysis of motive. *Frankenstein*, written by Mary Shelley (1797–1851) in competition with her husband the poet, and Byron, while on holiday by the Lake of Geneva, was the first of the 'robot' books. The mechanical monster whom Mary Shelley imagined is still stalking about the world. His footsteps today are more heavy and ominous than ever. The tale, told by this charming girl, is universal in its application. It is a variation of the Pygmalion and Galatea theme, and behind it we see the influence of

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Mary's father William Godwin, the revolutionary economist whose bleak, godless puritanism was to be a foretaste of the Fabianism and totalitarianism of our time.

It is, however, a mistake to be contemptuous of these exploiters of the romantic mood, the longings and fantasies of youth, the day-dreamers with nostalgic longings for a past that had never existed. Their work gave to the novel a reassurance of its poetic origins; origins which the first realists such as Defoe and Fielding had threatened to obscure. Even today, with a whole field of fiction developed from the romantic writers, critics are found who entertain the theory that the novelist and the poet approach life from different points of view, and express it with different techniques. It is an unfertile dualism, that in the end drives the novel towards a sterile utilitarianism, and frightens the poet away from experiment in prose fiction. Poetry is the life-blood of the novel, and it can always be discovered in the great examples of the art, even though their authors may have had no faculty for verse. Dickens, Tolstoi, Trollope, Bennett, Wells, novelists ordinarily dissociated from the idea of poetic inspiration have only to be examined afresh to be found abundant in poetic sensibility and vision.

In addition to this Gothic fashion, there was also the Oriental. It had both historical and literary sources. Trade had spread rapidly between Europe and the East. India was being sucked like an orange by the Nabobs, who brought its exotic splendour back to the home country. The arts of China and India were represented in the new country houses built by these gatecrashers into the ruling class. The lure of the Orient had begun, and explorers and tourists started the traffic which served to expand the British Empire so rapidly during the following century. Some people, such as Lady Hester Stanhope, settled in the Middle or Far East, to become legendary figures round whom bases of that expansion were fixed.

All this activity was bound to be reflected in contemporary literature. Trade brought the Far East into

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the imagination of our writers. Persia and Arabia were conjured by the translation of the thousand and one tales of the *Arabian Nights* (via the French) which appeared in England in 1704-17, in a feeble version by one Galland. All sorts of variations on these themes appeared both in France and England, but outstanding amongst these *pastiches* were the *Lettres Persanes* (1721) by the Comte de Montesquieu (1689-1755), a social philosopher who used this device for analysing his country's social and political customs as seen by a detached observer from Persia. He was imitated here by Oliver Goldsmith, whose *Citizen of the World* (see my edition in Everyman's Library No. 902) offered a pseudo-oriental commentary upon eighteenth-century England.

Addison and Steele fanned the flame of fashion by writing oriental sketches in *The Spectator*, and Johnson wrote a tale about Ethiopia (or rather his Grub Street conception of it) in his periodical *The Rambler*, an essay that was a prelude to the novel of *Rasselas*, which was to appear in 1759. This is a remarkable piece of work. It is as though an elephant should make a piece of lace. The ponderous latinate prose to which Johnson habituated himself has little appeal to readers today; but that is frequently the fault of the readers, and is due to their too easy habits of semi-literacy. Johnson's prose is unique, like Milton's verse. It is the man. It rumbles on, its gait full of character, and a deep-laid humour which is a vehicle for a sensibility so acute as sometimes to be almost pathological, and always to be sympathetic towards the goings-on of human nature. Johnson's knowledge of nature, and his approach to it, are often ludicrous. For example, in *Rasselas*, he makes the prince, confined within an enchanted circle of country by high mountains, tunnel his way out by digging and emerging at the top of a mountain! He was aided only by a somewhat long-winded poet, and his blue-stocking sister who kept *cave*, lest the guardians should detect the escapade. But such an impossibility does not matter, for the story has nothing to do with

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events. It is concerned with moral resolutions and their verification. When Johnson deals with morals, however, he is handling something which he sees as a solid, as firm as the stone which he kicked when he thought he was confuting the principles of the philosopher, Berkeley. He saw morals as the rough-hewn mineral of life, as Genesis itself. And this sense of fundamental actuality he imparts to the reader, or the listener. It is this which helps to make Boswell's *Life of Johnson* so massive a recreation of eighteenth-century England, for it informs all the recorded conversation of the Sage. The essays in *The Rambler* and *The Idler* are carved square with it, and it gives the definitions in his Dictionary their avoirdupois.

All that happens in his short novel is that Rasselas, the young prince, his sister Nekayah with her lady-in-waiting Pekuah, escape from the Happy Valley, or Royal Purlieus, with the poet Imlac as a sort of Mantuan. They go in search of true happiness, for it does not exist in their confined home and its precincts. They meet people from all walks of life, systematically combing society, and finally they give up the search and return to their diminished existence in the Happy Valley, wiser by experience, and perhaps more resigned to the elusive nature of happiness. There is one adventure which may be called novelistic; the lady Pekuah with her two maids is abducted by a band of Arabs and held for ransom. As the Prince has an unfailing source of supply in his sister's jewels, which enables the party to travel in state, this inconvenience is only a passing annoyance. But it gives opportunity for more moral discussion.

The prose, in spite of its Johnsonese (or perhaps because of it) is superbly matter-of-fact and lucid. The wisdom is characteristic. There is a famous passage in which the author prophesies the advent of flying, and the dangers of it.

'If men were all virtuous', says a mechanic [Johnson calls him an *artist*], 'I should with great alacrity teach

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them all to fly. But what would be the security of the good, if the bad could at pleasure invade them from the sky? Against an army sailing through the clouds, neither walls, nor mountains, nor seas, could afford any security. A flight of northern savages might hover upon the capital of a fruitful region that was rolling under them. Even this valley, the retreat of princes, the abode of happiness, might be violated by the sudden descent of some of the naked nations that swarm on the coast of the southern sea.'

And how appropriate to our neurosis today, created by too much news, too world-wide and rapid a consciousness of public affairs, is the following passage.

'On necessary and inevitable evils which overwhelm kingdoms at once, all disputation is vain: when they happen they must be endured. But it is evident, that these bursts of universal distress are more dreaded than felt; thousands and ten thousands flourish in youth and wither in age, without the knowledge of any other than domestic evils, and share the same pleasures and vexations, whether their kings are mild or cruel, whether the armies of their country pursue their enemies or retreat before them. While courts are disturbed with intestine competitions and ambassadors are negotiating in foreign countries, the smith still plies his anvil, and the husbandman drives his plough forward; the necessaries of life are required and obtained; and the successive business of the seasons continues to make wonted revolutions.'

Those two extracts are typical examples of the quality and tone of this outstanding contribution to the fashionable oriental romance. The critic who studies *Rasselas* is coerced, without premeditation, into an imitation of the pungency of Johnson's rotund phrases, as charming Fanny Burney discovered to her cost. I will make my escape quickly to two other important novels.

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Vathek is the second piece of orientalism which has survived. It is the work of an eccentric millionaire, William Beckford, who was the son of a Whiggish London merchant, a representative of the middle class now becoming so powerful. Beckford was educated privately, being an only child, and his almost incredible wealth enabled him to further the oddities of character set by the abnormal conditions of his childhood. Beginning life like a semi-divine potentate, he continued in the same way. Marrying into the aristocracy, he built himself a Gothic palace at the cost of over a quarter of a million pounds (worth about three millions today), with a tower 260 feet high. This tower subsequently fell and crushed most of the remainder of the absurd building. He also had another castle in Portugal, at Cintra. One party he gave at his English Palace of Fonthill, is said to have lasted a fortnight, and to have been conducted entirely in artificial light. In spite of his strange habits, he lived to a great age, and one of his two daughters married a Duke of Hamilton.

His novel, *Vathek*, if it can be called a novel, stands apart from all the other oriental imitations of the period because it is eastern not only in setting but also in dynamic. It develops as a sort of verbal exfoliation, a drama in rhodomontade; a direct grammatical equivalent of the designs of a Persian rug. It is purely, wholly a fantasy. It is Mithraic in conception, a kind of fire-dream, expressed in imagery that rolls cloudily up and out, billow upon billow, with growing splendour and luridity. It is the kind of book that quickly becomes surrounded in a legend of its own, like the present-day *Ulysses* of James Joyce. It was said to have been written in a sitting, during three days and two nights. In fact, Beckford wrote it, in French, between January 1782 and January 1783. He entrusted it to a Reverend Samuel Henley, a master at Harrow, who translated it and published the English version before the original could appear in Lausanne and Paris; indeed, before Beckford could finish certain interpolatory stories intended to adorn the end of the tale, where the Caliph and

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his lady are immured in the Hall of Eblis. It is in this part of the book where the author's imagination rises above the eccentricity and dilettantism of his character, and creates a visionary scene comparable in poetic grandeur with that of Coleridge in his poem *Kubla Khan*. It is a book from which nothing is to be learned. It has no moral. It is, in fact, an addition to the *Thousand and One Nights*, another pipe of dreams to while away the time, and to keep at bay the rich man's dreaded foe, *ennui*.

Neither the Gothic nor the Oriental modes was in the main stream. English romanticism has always had a form of its own, through which it has persisted as a constant element, making its way among the passing fashions, and emerging with its fundamental character unchanged. It is a romanticism based not upon Utopian illusions, or adherence to a golden past. It is matter-of-fact, and delights in the hour-by-hour contemplation of life, not overlooking the grim and the sordid. It is warm with humour, and contrives to be heroic as well as individualist, magnificent as well as small. Again like so much else in our native genius, it appears to have its foundations in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, where it is patently exemplified. It forms a sort of horizon of mood and sentiment; the English horizon. Over and under this horizon are placed all the other features of our literature, idiosyncratic offerings from individuals and other languages. Whatever is imported, such as French realism, or German morbidity, or Russian introspection, is tintured by this English romanticism, and thus subtly changed. The critic cannot define it. While it is an insular, national characteristic, it is most marked by its intense individuality. It makes each of our writers (unless he perversely denies his birthright) a free character speaking in a detached way, with his own authority about him. Thus it begins by being paradoxical, like our political habits. The romanticism of Tennyson is not the same as that of Blake, or Spenser. Nor is that of Dickens like that of Thackeray, nor that of Goldsmith like that of Fanny

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Burney. But all are English in that particular aspect of their work.

This is an odd thing to say of Oliver Goldsmith, who was an Irishman, and in *The Deserted Village*, his most famous poem, wrote of the Irish scene. Yet no writer could be more English than Goldsmith, and in his one novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, he has added to English fiction one of its most central and representative examples.

Goldsmith (1728-74) was the son of a Protestant vicar in the County of Longford, Ireland, and the tradition and culture in which he spent his childhood (an extremely impoverished one, with a father of six, 'passing rich on forty pounds a year') were English and not Irish. The boy was destined for the Church, turned to medicine, broke off his studies and continued them on the Continent, becoming perhaps one of the last of the 'wandering scholars' and thus a complete European. He went from university to university, disputing at each, and earning his bread and wine, while travelling, by playing the flute. He played the flute in literature as well, a soft, woody note, clear yet dulcet, of a tone that comes ravishingly upon the heart of the reader. No writer in our language is more golden, more mellow, either in spirit or expression.

The Vicar of Wakefield (1766) brought these personal qualities into English fiction and made them national. Sidney's *Arcadia* had given romanticism something of the same tinge, but one more wild with the fervours of the Renaissance. Goldsmith domesticated it, while at the same time giving it a cosmopolitan ease and deportment which he had learned in his travels. His philosophy of life was a more coherent one than he cared to expose in his work. His optimism was part of his personality, but he had defined it, perhaps from contact with the writings of Leibnitz, more certainly from his well-learned realism in contact, and friendly contact, with all sorts of men and women up and down Europe.

The story of *The Vicar of Wakefield* is of the follies and misfortunes of a naïve, middle-class household, a good

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representative of that growing section of society whose foibles and aspirations were to occupy most of our novelists from that time forward. The Vicar begins with a comfortable fortune, so that he can give his stipend of thirty-five pounds a year to charity. His country parsonage is the scene of complete happiness, with his wife, three sons and two daughters. The girls are contrasted, Olivia the elder being a statuesque beauty with many *beaux* to her string, Sophia the second being a modest violet whose charms appear more gradually, and are calculated to attract one but faithful suitor. The eldest son George is in love with the daughter of a neighbouring and wealthy parson who proposes to remarry for the fourth time. This causes the first rift in the happiness of the Primrose home, for Dr Primrose has one foible, he is fanatically opposed to clergy marrying more than once. This results in George's suit being rejected by the girl's father, and the boy goes off to London to seek his fortune, ending there as a strolling player.

Then the Vicar loses his fortune by fraud, the local Squire Thornhill turns out to be a villainous seducer of innocent girls (Olivia being a victim); the family misfortunes are increased by the dupability of the second son Moses (in this like his father). The Vicar takes another living, and on the way there meets an elderly stranger who later turns out to be the man who restores the family fortunes, marries Sophia, confounds the wicked squire, and brings the book to a happy conclusion, with virtue rewarded and vice punished. It is all charming, and the reader not only condones the obvious stagecraft of the happy ending, but welcomes it as part of the atmosphere of good-fellowship and religious faith, based upon happiness in little things, which Goldsmith imported into the English novel, as the sun conjures up fruit-scented mists on a September morning.

The ease with which Goldsmith wrote rivalled even that of Fielding, and in this matter both writers did great service towards the development of the English novel.

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Whatever subject Goldsmith touched, he handled in a free, open way that makes his verse and prose spring as naturally 'as grass grows on the weir'. He had every quality of a great journalist, and here again he was a pioneer in the profession of letters, bringing the gusto and scholarship of the Elizabethan journalists, the grace of Addison, the authority of Johnson, and passing on all this wealth, both technical and professional, to the future practitioners who were to combine so amply the creative gifts with the daily expertise of the journalist. Johnson summed up his qualities in a phrase which even the jealous Boswell had to record. 'Goldsmith, however, was a man, who whatever he wrote, did it better than any other man could do. He deserved a place in Westminster Abbey, and every year he lived, would have deserved it better. He had, indeed, been at no pains to fill his mind with knowledge. He transplanted it from one place to another; and it did not settle in his mind; so he could not tell what was in his own books.'

It was Johnson who came to his rescue from time to time, notably on the occasion when he was confined to bed for lack of a shirt, whereupon Johnson took the manuscript of *The Vicar of Wakefield* to a bookseller and sold it for sixty pounds. Johnson was not blinded to the faults of the book. Indeed, he subsequently spoke severely of it to Mrs Thrale, saying 'No, Madam, it is very faulty; there is nothing of real life in it, and very little of nature. It is a mere fanciful performance.' Yet there it remains, like the poems of W. H. Davies who has been so miscalled a nature poet and a realist. Goldsmith's work lives by reason of the magic gold of his phrases; and the phrases are the style of the man himself. There is something of the French contemporary Prévost about him, and *The Visar* can profitably be compared with *Manon Lescaut*. I recollect one expert bookman, the late Robert Garnett, who maintained that he had in his possession an early translation of *Manon Lescaut* whose style points to the probability that Goldsmith made it. Certainly he must have

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known the French writer, and profited from his ease of narrative, tolerance of events, and gentleness in judgement.

Twelve years after the appearance of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the young daughter of a famous musicologist timidly put out a piece of fiction which at once swept her into fame and the benign notice of Dr Johnson, a friend of her father. Fanny Burney was not a brilliant woman, not an example of the 'blue stocking' of the eighteenth century, those formidable creatures whose claws lay always so close beneath the pads of politeness. She was a simple girl, obtuse to political matters, mildly snobbish in a harmless way (except to herself), and interested in the hour by hour events of middle- and upper-class life which she saw around her. She kept a diary, which today is more frequently read than her several novels. But in her own day her first book, *Evelina* (1778) was the piece that brought her into public life, and landed her so unhappily as a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, a post in which she wasted five years of her life in humiliation and physical discomfort.

Fanny Burney (1752-1840) spent her childhood and youth in a household not dissimilar from that pictured in *The Chronicle of Magdalena Bach*, the charming tale by Esther Meyhell about the ménage of the Bach family. Her father was a friend of everybody of intellectual and artistic consequence, and the girl was thus prematurely brought into contact with the great musicians, writers, painters and other practitioners of the day. She even met the aristocracy, and it seems that here lay her principal attraction. Her novels revel in the comings and goings of the upper set, and display no small disgust towards the coarser and blunter habits of the middle class to which she herself belonged. But she put her snobbish instincts to good practice, and thus paved the way for a much greater writer, Jane Austen, and through her to a whole school of women writers of whom the most outstanding example today is Angela Thirkell.

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Fanny Burney's contribution to the history of the novel has been summed up by David Cecil in his book *Poets and Storytellers*. He says she 'had a typical English talent; she was a bright, light, humorous observer of the outward scene, not a psychological analyst; and, like Fielding, what attracted her about the novel form was the opportunity it provided for giving an entertaining picture of the world about her. In their main lines her novels are of the Fielding type, satirical panoramas of society centring upon an agreeable hero and heroine, and held together rather loosely by a symmetrical plot, culminating in their happy marriage. Perhaps the shortest way to sum up her place in the history of English Letters is to say that she was the first writer to translate the Fielding type of novel into the feminine key'. It should be added, however, that she modelled *Evelina* more consciously upon Richardson's *Pamela*, writing it in epistolary form, and suffusing it in the same way with sentiment. But her sentiment was shrewder, more acid, more realistic. Like Richardson, she put a high premium upon physical chastity, and she was easily shocked by coarseness either of phrase or conduct. She would not, I venture, admit to an admiration for Fielding because of his excursions into the robust field of lower life. It is significant that the subtitle of her book was 'The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World', which gives it something of the débutante's touch and expectancy.

Her book is about the confusions arising from concealed identities and repudiated marriages. The main theme is the life of *Evelina*, who only late in the tale discovers the identity of her own father. The moral atmosphere is centred round the rise of the girl from trade-tainted beginnings to a marriage into the aristocracy (so characteristic of Miss Burney). Out of her own social weakness, perhaps, she drew with cunning the people who pretend to a social standing to which they are not entitled by birth. Her Mr Smith of Holborn, one of the minor suitors of the heroine, captured Dr Johnson's droll

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sense of humour. Mrs Thrale tells how 'he declares the fine gentleman *manqué* was never better drawn; and he acted him the whole evening, saying he was "all for the ladies"'. And Boswell records how Johnson said to Miss Burney, "Oh, you are a sly little rogue! – What a Holborn beau have you drawn!" "Ay, Miss Burney," said Mrs Thrale, "the Holborn beau is Dr Johnson's favourite; and we have all your characters by heart, from Mr Smith up to Lady Louisa." "Oh, Mr Smith, Mr Smith is the man!" cried he, laughing violently. "Harry Fielding never drew so good a character! – such a fine varnish of low politeness! – such a struggle to appear a gentleman! Madam, there is no character better drawn anywhere – in any book by any author."'

No doubt the Grand Cham's judgement was affected by pretty Fanny's affectionate-niece attitude towards him; but it is true that in *Evelina* and decreasingly in her other novels *Cecilia*, or *Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814), she deployed a sprightliness of spirit that gave the novel a new, up-to-date aspiration which it retains to this day. She introduced the technique of photographic character-study, making fiction topical and therefore feminine. In *Cecilia*, her second novel written before her debilitating experience at the Royal Court, she made a tale out of the problems of snobbery, for the plot turns upon whether or not Mortimer Delvile, a proud but penniless aristocrat, can sink his family pride in order to marry Cecilia, who inherits her fortune on the condition that when she marries her husband shall take her family (less exalted) name. This theme is embellished with a number of minor plots and incidents, among the latter being a really masterly scene in Vauxhall Gardens.

After the long period of silence caused by her incarceration at Court, she lost her literary charm and liveliness. Added to this, she also lost confidence in her own style, and ruined her last two books by imitating Dr Johnson's prose, the effect being that of an undergraduate

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masquerading in the Dean's canonicals. These books are thus unreadable today, and were coolly received when she published them. But against this, we have to remember that the last page of *Cecilia* provided the title for Jane Austen's first book *Pride and Prejudice*. That alone is a claim to immortality, were not the authorship of *Evelina* with its intrinsic value and its effect upon the history of the English novel, sufficient to ensure that immortality.

Among the dense undergrowth of fiction to which I have referred at the head of this chapter, most of it spurious romance, there also sprang up a more woody and durable bush, which may be called the social or economic novel, seeded from old *Piers Plowman*, and *Utopia*. At this time, its power lay not in its literary quality, but in the fact that it handled the problems of the age; the problems that were pressing and swelling with such vehemence that they were bursting the integuments of society, shattering the last relics of feudalism into shards, and throwing out tendrils of prophecy which should exfoliate into the pattern of future society.

The prescription for this kind of fiction came from France, for the *Encyclopaedists*, that formidable body of artist-philosophers armed with fine-edged prose, had already laid plans for perfecting life upon earth. They were even known as the *Perfectabilians*, but this was before the way to their Ideal State became grooved by the wheels of the tumbril. Rousseau brought to this preoccupation with social conditions the personal sensibility added by Richardson to the novel, and in his *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and *Émile* (1762) he set the argument which was to constitute so enduring an inquiry into the questions of the individual versus the State, rank in opposition to merit, inner virtue as against convention, and all the other worked up antinomies many of which are problems of our own day, dividing the world into two great camps whose bivouac fires have an ominous and baleful gleam.

The question of education naturally played a large part

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in this examination of existing values, and this accounts for the popularity of Henry Brooke's *Fool of Quality* (1766), dealing with the upbringing of a Christian gentleman (involving visits to prisons and hospitals, at that time sinks of horror); Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton* (1783), a tale for the young which makes an instructive comparison with Compton Mackenzie's masterpiece *Sinister Street*, contrasting life at Oxford in the eighteenth century with that at the beginning of the present century; Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), a tale attacking the influence of boarding schools; and finally the majority of the writings of that interesting woman Maria Edgeworth; interesting because she was to influence one greater than herself, Sir Walter Scott, who openly acknowledged his debt. Miss Edgeworth was a member of an Anglo-Irish family prolific in eccentrics. Her father, on his estate in northern Ireland, set up the first experimental telegraph system, which was almost taken over by the English War Office. Her nephew, the poet-doctor Thomas Lovell Beddoes, was forced to live abroad because of the aberrations of his sexual life, and he returned to England on one occasion to be discovered trying to set fire to Covent Garden Opera House with a five-pound note. He ended as a suicide, leaving behind him some of the finest critical letters of the age, and a fake-Elizabethan drama called *Death's Jest-book* which is a combination of the then fashionable macabre, with a Shakespearean opulence of diction.

It is not extravagant to claim that, from the historical point of view, Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) was the bridge between Fanny Burney and the greater realists of the nineteenth century, particularly Jane Austen and Thackeray. Add to that her influence upon Scott, and her importance as a factor in the advancement of the field of the English novel becomes emphatic. She was witty, learned, experienced in social life and possessed of the right sophistication for assessing human motives and conduct. She had a good ear for a prose paragraph, and a faculty for writing memorable things. But she lacked

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genius. It may be that her ponderous father, a typical pseudo-scientific crank of the eighteenth century and a domestic tyrant whose sway was powerful because of its benevolence, played too large a part in her choice of subjects. He was a great man for education, and had endless theories about the bringing up of children. In consequence, didacticism was the atmosphere which Maria breathed from her cradle. She wrote many books about and for children, such as *Moral Tales* (1801), *Popular Tales*, *Parent's Assistant*, and *Frank*, all about the same time. There is a freshness still in her children's books, a quality to which Mary Lamb must have been attracted when she wrote *Mrs Leicester's School* and her part of the *Tales from Shakespeare*.

Miss Edgeworth's novels fall into two groups, those about London social life, and those about the humorous but uneasy relationship between Irish landlords and the peasantry. In both groups she was a pioneer. In the first (represented by *The Absentee*, 1812), there appears the comic figure of the outlander, the colonial, the Irish, or the American, who comes to break into English high society. This theme has since never ceased to attract novelists, for it is rich in the possibilities of social satire, and the study of manners in conflict with character. In the second (represented by *Castle Rackrent* - 1800 and *Ormond* - 1817) this versatile and prolific author exploited her gift for producing local colour and portrayal of the Irish peasantry with its racy and poetic speech. In this she created a literary race but faintly connected with real life, one which has overrun the world of fiction, and is now colonizing happily in the land of radio. Her immediate imitators were Samuel Lover (1797-1868) and Charles Lever (1806-72). Lover's *Handy Andy* (1842), the picaresque tale of a comic Irish manservant, and Lever's *Harry Lorrequer* (1837), which is as much an imitation of Smollett as it is of Miss Edgeworth, exploits to the point of farce and slap-stick vaudeville the idiosyncrasies of Irish humour in speech and conduct. Miss Edgeworth was always more realist and

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faithful to life, and this accounts for her monitorship of Scott.

This serious handling of Irish themes was furthered in the books of William Carleton (1794-1869), the son of a Tyrone farmer. He knew the struggle that went on close to the land of his country, with priest, parson, landlord, and peasant all in bitter, common opposition. The politics, morals, and economics underlying these struggles were for the first time developed in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1830), *Valentine M'Clutchy, the Irish Agent* (1845), *The Black Prophet* (1847), *The Black Baronet* (1852), *The Tythe Proctor* (1842). The evils of the absentee landlord, squandering in Mayfair the money wrung from his starving tenants; the impersonal avarice of a foreign church; the horrors of periodical famine; these grim themes were not allowed, however, to crush the author's poetic temper, and it may be said of him that he was the precursor of those Celtic story-tellers and poets who at the end of the nineteenth century were to waken Deirdre from the sleep of malnutrition into which she had been sunk since the Vikings came to Ireland.

It was Maria Edgeworth who first specialized in the regional novel, leading those 'singers to a little clan' in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Wessex, and every other annexe of the English-speaking world, and giving them through their provincialism a universal passport. In her attention to social problems, however, she was one among many, for events abroad were becoming so violent that the fabric of English life was shuddering like a house in an earthquake. The novel was not to escape this disturbance.

Reform was in the air during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The French Revolution brought all its vague manifestations to a head; and it proved to be a bullet head that was to batter down more than the doors of the Bastille. The doctrine inside that head was not a new one, for as we have seen, its cry for liberty, if not for fraternity and equality, had been persistent, if faint, through the whole of English literature since the time of

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Langland, who in his *Piers Plowman* combined criticism of the religious and political systems in England at the end of the fourteenth century, after their failure to stand the strain imposed by the Black Death. The reforms of Edward the Third had promised to bring prosperity and a more constitutional régime. But in the economic chaos consequent upon the loss of over a third of the population by plague, all these promises of a better life were swept away. Langland's bitter comment upon this was the first great social novel (a rather dull one, written in alliterative verse of the West-midland dialect).

So again at the end of the eighteenth century disappointment was to follow high hopes. The arcadian paradise pictured by the exquisites earlier in the century was interrupted by the violence of the Revolution, and trodden down by the sudden thrust of machine power, a force which even yet we have not learned to subordinate to social wisdom. The appetite of the growing mercantile class was ravenous still, and in its unconscious grasp after wealth and power the whole of society was being shaken.

A flood of books reflected these troubles. Those of them that were presented in the form of the novel are dead with the rest, and need not be exhumed. I have mentioned Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a survivor. A novel by her father, William Godwin, is another. *Caleb Williams* (1794) is a tale of violent individual passions, squire set against squire, and their unfortunate tenants and relatives caught up in the feud. Murder, remorse, the efforts of social pride to cover up the past, and the blunders of innocence in revealing it, all are utilized to make a story of highly dramatic intensity. Remorse and insanity finally swallow the rest of the emotions, and the reader closes the book with a sense of exhaustion. But he should not be too overcome by the personal tragedies in which the tale abounds, to reflect upon it and to see in it a parable of the times, where justice is shown as an outcast, and privilege as a tyrant.

This criticism of caste was repeated in a novel called *Hermesprong* (1796) by Robert Bage (1728-1801), an in-

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dustrialist and radical who in his spare time imitated the philosophic tales of Voltaire, but much more discursively than his master. Hermsprong was a simple-life exponent, owing to his having been brought up amongst the Redskins of North America (the 'noble savage' again!). His plain-speaking sets English society by the ears. The course of his love for a nobleman's daughter thus becomes unsmooth, but all is set right in the end by the discovery that the idealist from across the Atlantic is heir to the angry father's estate and title. Bage was unlike Godwin not only in his habit of happy endings to his tales, but in his humdrum radicalism; for Godwin was no believer in a Fabian approach to the art of government. His theories were heightened by a touch of wilful anarchism.

Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809), whose best book, *Memoirs* (completed by Hazlitt) is an autobiography, and therefore outside the scope of our survey, was the son of a cobbler. He saw society from the bottom of the ladder, and thus his idea of what was happening at the top remained distorted. His first novel, *Alwyn* (1780) has the same theme as J. B. Priestley's *Good Companions*, for it tells the fortunes of a group of strolling players, but it is much more concerned with economic and social conditions. Holcroft's best-known novel, *Hugh Trevor* (1794) appeared in the same year as *Caleb Williams*. Here the picaresque progress is used again, but for the purpose of depicting the growth of philosophic radicalism in the hero's mind. Hugh sees his father a bankrupt, becomes an apprentice, suffers escapades in the underworld, takes to the road, tries to educate himself, and is finally adopted by a rich grandfather and sent to Oxford. But this good fortune does not remove him from contact with the fraud and chicanery of life, for he finds Oxford to be a sink of debauchery, and when later he enters the political world he discovers even worse vices to be rampant. The description of a Parliamentary Election must surely have been read by Dickens before the writing of *Pickwick Papers*.

None of these sociological novels survive on their merits

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as stories. They interest the historian, and if *Caleb Williams* survives it is because of the cold intensity of temper in its author, a power that almost amounted to genius, dominating English political thought for several decades, then floating down like an iceberg into the fog and mugginess of industrialism as it was to develop in the nineteenth century, there to dwindle away. An age and a condition of human life was to come which called for giants; and the call was answered.

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It has been seen that the development of the English novel has been more or less a reflex of the changes in social conditions. The art was fulfilling its purpose of acting as a mirror of life. But this function was not, and never should be, a mechanical and automatic process. The novel, like the poem, is after all a flower of the individual personality, and its variety therefore must be as infinite as the characteristics of men and women, demonstrated not only in their social relations, but also in their moments and moods of solitude. A historian of the novel must keep this fact before him, and he is helped to do so by a renewed emphasis on my earlier statement that the novel is the child of poetry. This aspect of the novel is to be particularly noted today, because the economic and political trends of human affairs threaten to drag the novel among the official machinery of the State. The threat has been fulfilled in Totalitarian countries. But industrialism is also an enemy, because it standardizes our environment, and thus compresses our experience into ordained shapes, and makes our reactions uniform. Could Fielding, or Dickens, today find effortlessly that amazing, picturesque contrast of costume, habit, ideas, and finally of character, which adorns their tales of contemporary life? If we compare the fabric of Arnold Bennett's novels, and the still later R. C. Hutchinson's novels (both writers with a keen eye for idiosyncrasy and the objective oddities of life), we find the modern scene to be monotonous in colour. Already people are more alike at least in appearance and social habits. That is one reason why novelists have had to plunge beneath the surface,

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seeking the internal drama which individuals are becoming too civilized to demonstrate, except in times of political violence, and personal crisis.

Readers jealous for the freedom of the novel, should turn to the work of Jane Austen (1775-1817) with an initial sense of gratitude at the spectacle of a novelist so impervious to the influence of contemporary events and problems. The admiration, one might even say the passionate adoration (indeed, the great critic George Saintsbury said it again and again), will follow. But first, here is a matter for congratulation over the grand health of letters, at a time when so much extravagance and modishness were poisoning the air, consequent upon the eruption of Romanticism. It was not that Jane Austen was unaware of what was happening. She was neither obtuse nor insensitive, as her early novel *Northanger Abbey* shows, towards the excitements and heightened sensations which life and literature together were exploring at that time. But she was marvellous, being so young, that she could stand against the vast tide and not be toppled over. *Northanger Abbey* is an ironic parody (it is also much else that heralds new features in the art of the novel) of the Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis extravaganza; and in hitting at those practitioners, she was also containing an almost precocious criticism of the licence of the times in which she lived.

She has been condemned as cold and petty because in all her other work she turned her back on the stage of contemporary history where such vast transformations were being posed. But such criticism of this superb artist is blunt-fingered. One has the sensation of seeing a Ming bowl in the hands of a potman. Consider the controlled tension in the miniature and private conflict with which she concerns herself in her art, and realize how in this tea-cup drama (if it *must* be described in diminutive terms) she was opposing to each other all the forces out of which man has made his life on earth an approximation to or a travesty of truth; a heaven or a hell. Because Miss Austen summed up in her work a recognition of the rightness of

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Dr Johnson's words, which I have quoted in Chapter VII, about the small events of life which have to be furthered while (as Thomas Hardy said) 'dynasties rise and fall', we should not therefore use this to limit the scope of her genius or the range of her consciousness. Her terminology, of scene, social order, events, setting, is precise; but its symbolism is universal because it can everywhere be recognized and accepted as valid.

What is that terminology? It is made out of the fabric of the world of the small country gentry in England during the second half of the eighteenth century; a tiny field both in time and space, but how perfectly cultivated! Jane Austen was born in the heart of rural England, her father being rector of Steventon, a village in the north of Hampshire. The scene of her impressionable years, therefore, was that with which we are endearingly familiarized by Gilbert White's *Selborne*, one of the most serene books in all literature. The basis of Jane's work is serenity. She makes it her mirror, to hold up to life so that the tumult and the passion, the error and the excess, are cooled against that unobtrusive surface before they touch her consciousness or are manipulated by her art.

She had no professional encouragement. In those days the activity of letters was not yet a respectable profession, though within a generation it was to become so, and the novel also to be accepted as something other than an indulgence. Jane was to play an indirect part in this acceptance, not only by the quiet authority of her own work, but by her influence upon Scott.

She was precocious as an artist, for her first books are almost as perfect as her last. Some people even believe that *Pride and Prejudice*, written when she was twenty-one, is her best; and that must remain a matter of personal choice. For myself, I think *Emma* her masterpiece; but that is until I re-read *Mansfield Park*! *Sense and Sensibility* was written at the age of twenty-two. Then *Northanger Abbey* was written, and bought for ten pounds by a Bath bookseller, who put it in a drawer and left it there, to be bought

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back by her family after her death. Perhaps a little discouraged by this inability to get her books before the world, she waited for eight years, during which she went out into the world of Bath and Southampton, and spent periods with her brother at Godmersham, on the estate in East Kent which had been left him by his god-parents (see the reference to this in my book *Kent*). No doubt the handsome house at Godmersham Park is the original of *Mansfield Park*. As I have said in that book, 'to visit Godmersham today is to see physically something of that sedate world with its gift for ironic observation, its tidy control of the violence of nature, which Jane Austen made her medium'.

After that period of silence, during which she was accumulating material, Jane wrote her three most mature books, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*. It was not until these were done that she tasted the pleasures, and saltings, of publication. *Sense and Sensibility* appeared in 1811, thirteen years after it was written. Her success was considerable, and she was invited by the Prince Regent (who carried about with him a set of her books) to write a history of his Royal House of Cobourg. But she was wiser than Fanny Burney, and was not to be cozened by snobbery.

Both Macaulay and Saintsbury have compared Jane Austen to Shakespeare. Her likeness to him is in her personal elusiveness. We know little about either personality, except that both appear to have been remarkably level-headed, and ironically detached from the glamour of their profession and the heat of its successes. Shakespeare got out as soon as he had made a comfortable fortune. For the last five years of her life Jane kept an enigmatic silence. There was not even a dark gentleman to represent in her life what the Dark Lady represented in Shakespeare's, at least for the commentators. Nor can she be directly discovered in her books, for such is her genius that she was able to set her characters on the stage instantly and wholly formed, each of them not only revealing a unique identity

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to the eye and ear of the reader (as people do in real life), but also putting their own view of life before the reader. This last is miraculous: and it has led some critics astray by making them believe that here they have caught the author projecting herself and her own prejudices and opinions. Careful examination of such passages shows that they change their perspective line with every character, and that they are always in keeping with the nature of the characters concerned, as we can judge from their conduct and the more immediate revelation of the dialogue.

Nothing like this had occurred in English fiction before. It was neither a feminine nor a masculine trait. It was pure art, with the painter wholly identified with her material. Jane owed something to Fanny Burney, in the matter of wielding topical and gossipy events. But Fanny's garrulous character was constantly rippling over the surface of her work, and leaving a little foam, like lace, behind. She may have mirrored her times, but she constantly breathed on the glass, so close and ardent was her mood. Jane's mirror remained cold and clear. She stood aloof from it, noting every blemish which it revealed in its quicksilver reflections. The atmosphere of the books is eighteenth century, since everything is subdued to the needs of the comedy of manners, even the anguishes and ardours of the mind and heart, even the congenial drama of the English countryside and provincial town. No *Wuthering Height*, no mad woman in the attic, loom as ominous background behind the intricate pattern woven, it seems, by these ladies and gentlemen of their own volition upon the floor of an exquisite civilization of comfort and sufficient wealth. It seems; but we know by a frequent return to Jane's books, that this apparent free-will is only another triumph of her art, another disguise worn naturally by her elusive genius. She remains behind her squires, curates, doctors, their ladies and their servants, almost a shadowy figure in perpetual retreat, yet one of the most pronounced, and certainly the most adored, creative artists who have ever practised at the English novel.

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One of the first critics publicly to praise the novels of Jane Austen was a writer whose work was almost diametrically opposed to hers. Walter Scott (1771-1832) had a faculty for almost universal appreciation. Like Shakespeare, he could 'find good in everything', and this full appetite for enjoyment of life in all its manifestations was the foundation of his gigantic output of literary work. He praised both Jane Austen and Miss Edgeworth for their contribution to the novel of topical scene and character. But he did not follow them in this. The conciseness and precision of Jane, and the practical realism of Maria, were quite foreign to him, though he sighed after those qualities a little ruefully, knowing his own faults without being able to suppress them. Indeed, he was shrewdly Scottish enough in his amiable obstinacy to know that in those faults lay his strength. For they were faults of light, and not of darkness; positive, not negative. The qualities he did not possess were those which a fine-natured boy does not possess; and to the end of his over-worked life he retained the characteristics of a fine-natured boy.

Scott did not turn to novel-writing until he had reached his forties, and had already made fame and fortune as a poet. In turning from verse to prose narrative, however, he changed neither in manner nor matter. His long poems were repositories, as were his novels, of the vast accumulation of knowledge which his romantic imagination never ceased to collect. From boyhood he had been storing up facts about the past; costume, arms, heraldry, domestic and military customs, legends and actualities, the lives and characters of peasants and royal persons, all the 'old, unhappy, far off things and battles long ago'. It is significant that his own favourite among his many books was *The Antiquary* (1816), his third novel, published in the same year as *Old Mortality*. I spoke of his romantic imagination collecting this material. This distinction is important, because had he been purely antiquarian, he would not have filled the need of the age. The Romantic outburst in Europe, upheaving society as a plough furrows a field,

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prepared the way for strange crops. One of them was the desire to rekindle the past, now so detached from the present, or seemingly so. The Gothic revival was part of this manifestation. Scott's poems, *Marmion*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, all published in the first decade of the nineteenth century, more than met the need, for they pictured medieval life not only with an astounding mass of vivid detail, but they showed it surviving, in the Scottish fastnesses, to within a few decades of the author's own time. It was as if, by some freak of regional sequestration of time, he had been able to reach and touch his almost fabulous characters, and take them by the hand in fellowship of understanding and emotion.

Throughout the rest of his work, even when he was tired and broken by overwork, financial worry, and failing health, he never lost this almost physical contact with the past. It made him wear his antiquarianism as a boy wears a pair of old breeks, with careless ease, not worrying if he should tear them here and there in his struggle to scale the heights of historical accuracy. It was this ease which endeared him to his contemporaries, for hitherto the revival of the past had been carried on by writers whose reincarnation of history was both perfunctory and incompetent. Scott too did not scruple to distort facts, cutting them about to fit the episodic form of his tales; but in doing so he always enriched their significance with a poetic wealth of his own; thereby proving once again how the approach to life of the novelist and the poet is the same; through terms of an inspired imagery, interpreting always through the particular to the general, and never resting content with a mere cataloguing of facts or a scientific recording.

The result was an immense popularity. With the publication of his first novel *Waverley* in 1814, Scott began to build up a second fortune. It was a lucky change over, for his poetry was now being challenged by that of Byron, a much headier brew. The novels appeared in quick succession, one, sometimes two a year. He had done much editing of other poets, collecting of folk-tales and verse,

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translating (including Goethe's youthful play *Gotz von Berlichingen*). His own poetry was already a formidable body of work. Now, turning to the novel in the full maturity of his genius, working a vein of antiquarian and historical knowledge so long-gathered and stored as to be almost a mass of instinctive lore, he poured out the *Waverley Novels* in a colourful stream that flooded Europe, carrying the reputation of the novel from the depths to the heights, and fecundating everywhere the latest seed-beds of romantic fiction, for them to flower profusely throughout the rest of the century. There is no end to the inquiry about his influence abroad, not only in literature but music and the plastic arts as well. The work of Victor Hugo, of Hector Berlioz, of Balzac and Donizetti, Merimée and Dumas, Delacroix and Franz Liszt; the writers, painters, and musicians are innumerable who owed directly or indirectly something of their romantic fervour to the vast sources offered them by Walter Scott.

It is said that he is not much read today. Certainly the novel has learned greater subtleties of technique since his time, and greater masters have carried it further, or at least deeper, for only Tolstoi has carried it so *widely* afield, and that not so frequently. Scott is out of fashion, perhaps, because of his very objectivity, that quality which made me speak of him as like a fine-natured boy. This unsophisticated gift of enjoyment, of seeing people and things from outside, as a spectacle lit by surprise and even rapture, is a faculty of youth, and Scott, in possessing it all his life, was thus able to penetrate the emotions and viewpoints of European society, and particularly Scottish society, with a warm recognition and fellow-feeling that brought the past instantly to life. But it was a life that today leaves us unsatisfied. That very boyishness, so fresh and brimming, withheld Scott from pausing before, and penetrating into the depths of human nature. Others coming after him, Flaubert, Dostoevski, Henry James, did that, carrying the mood of lyric rather than epic poetry into the vitality of the novel. In a way, Scott was interested in the gadgets of

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life, rather than in human motives. He was thus an inspired, an exalted pageant-master, of enormous energy and sparing no expense, who organized a procession through the ages, from the medieval to the nineteenth-century moment, in which every degree of humanity played a part, and wore the appropriate costume. Kings and queens, outlaws and cut-throats, men of law and of war, girls and crones, witches and even ghosts, took their places in that procession, hundreds of them, winding their way out of the past, making the recognizable gestures, speaking the expected words. But it is all so public, so ceremonial. The modern mind, so far as its interest in human nature is concerned, begins to feel a slight sense of boredom at so much naïve and obvious poster-work. It turns from the human side of the novels of Scott to the setting, and finds there a substantiality more satisfying than the lives of his characters. For those characters do not make their own destiny; they are creatures of it; and in this we see a contradiction at the heart of Scott's work, for it is odd that a romantic artist, passionately absorbed in the delineation of individuality, should at the same time be unable to present those human figures, intended to contain that individuality, other than as beings subjected always to the vague but all-powerful influences of nature.

Nature with Scott was something so positive that it makes his landscapes, his presentation of weather, season, forest, and flower, the most intense and dominant of all the forces in his work. With the publication of *Waverley*, there appeared in English fiction for the first time a fully-coloured scene, a poet's consciousness of landscape, and an evocation of atmosphere in which the reader's physical self is steeped. It may be no exaggeration to say that Scott made Europeans aware of the aesthetic power of their own lands and seas, and especially their mountains. From that time, the Alps were seen as something other than barbaric fastnesses to shudder at and to avoid. And in the same way, Scott presented the spirit of time as well as the spirit of place. With him, history was also a scenic matter,

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and in this rich visual abundance he survives today so that we can still read him with surprise and delight, though we know now that his humans are also creatures of the eye rather than of the mature understanding, in spite of the fact that the one person is sharply differentiated from the other, even when he is portraying figures who once lived, the kings, prelates, and warriors of the past. Louis XI of France in *Quentin Durward*, James I in *The Fortunes of Nigel*, Queen Elizabeth in *Kenilworth*, these are a few examples of the vivid evocation of which Scott was capable, while at the same time they show that he was a pageant-master rather than a historian, and a historian rather than a novelist.

His influence on the English novel, however, was a nodal one. He brought together so many of the strands which had been preparing during the past several centuries. In his tales are to be found the romantic, the historical, the comedy of manners; all those elements of English fiction to which I referred at the beginning of Chapter IV. Scott left the novel fully habilitated in our literature; no longer something to be read furtively. It was now a literary form to instruct and to elevate the mind, safely to be put before the young and the innocent. It had entered upon its full inheritance.

But there was still one greater to come who should multiply that inheritance. Charles Dickens published *Pickwick Papers* in 1837, five years after Scott's death, and from that time the growth of the popularity of the novel was so rapid and so vast that the whole economic structure of the book-producing world was blown to pieces. The old-fashioned bookseller-publisher, content with circulations of a few thousand at the most, disappeared, to be replaced by the whole-time publisher as we know him today, marketing his wares wholesale to the book-selling trade, and assuming for himself a professional status as dignified as that of the creative artists whose work was his raw material. The novels of Dickens were responsible for this development. They brought the novel and its place in

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society, to a point at which our historical survey may be considered to be complete. All that happens after, is the manifestation of literary idiosyncrasy, and its interplay with the changing currents of public taste as dictated by the advance in education, economic, moral, and social conditions, and all the rest of those infinite actualities of daily life which build up the coral-reef of history. Since the time of Dickens the novel has been *there*, a ready instrument and gauge, to be used for whatever purpose, whether diagnostic or prophetic, humanity might require.

Looking back now, we see Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray as such giants that they tend to over-shadow the mass of smaller elevations making the literary scene of those early years of the nineteenth century. But those foothills need to be surveyed, especially by the reader whose interest in the novel is extrinsic. This study leads to complications and subtleties, for by now the repercussions of outgoing influences begin to be felt, influences from abroad and from the new fields of literary life (soon to be overwhelming) in America. But it is among these less than great figures among writers practising the art of the novel that we find the personalities whose idiosyncrasy, and even eccentricity, save the novel from becoming stereotyped, a tendency to which fiction is only too prone because of its popularity and the ease with which caterers can purvey it to an ever-hungry public.

It is in this aspect that a writer like Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866) is outstanding. He was a sort of cross between Landor and Sydney Smith, a *littérateur* full of odd and unorthodox scholarship, an amateur writer (he was a servant of the East India Company for the most of his working life), a friend of poets (particularly of Shelley in his early years) and a skilful versifier himself. His prose is witty, teeming with ideas and crochets, a feast over which the author presides like an epicurean Socrates, directing the rivers of talk as a *bon viveur* directs the flow of wine. Most of his books are alike in their setting. It is always a country-house party, where host and guests sit interminably at

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the dining-table, well-fed but alert, building a drama of conversation. It is all so exciting that the reader, participating, has from time to time the illusion of stooping and picking up a napkin fallen from his knees as he rises in his place to interrupt a speaker. The best introduction to Peacock is Mr J. B. Priestley's biographical study in the Men of Letters series (1927). With this, the reader new to a unique author can better appreciate the group of novels, which includes *Headlong Hall* (1816), *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), *Crotchet Castle* (1831), and *Gryll Grange* (1861), whose concentrated flavour became an ingredient in so much work that was to follow; notably in the early books of Peacock's son-in-law George Meredith, as well as in those of Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton.

Amongst the other considerable novelists who arose during the first half of the nineteenth century, Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton are distinguished because they went somewhat against the general tendency. That tendency was carrying the English novel towards the methods of Realism as, a generation later, it was to be perfected and hardened in France by Zola and de Maupassant. Such an approach had always been latent, from the days of *Piers Plowman*, but it could not reach a complete ascendancy until its method, and its nature, were released by the open, sceptical approach to life that followed the break-up of a theological control, either orthodox or dissentient, under which all the arts had hitherto functioned.

Meanwhile, Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield), 1804-81, who with his rival Gladstone, was an outstanding political figure of the Victorian age, used the novel as a means to an ideological end. What he tried to achieve as a Parliamentarian, he essayed also through fiction. He wanted to stem the tide of industrial individualism, that latest turn of Whigism which was debauching our cities, starving and fouling our countryside, and filling our banks with gold. The grandson of a Venetian Jew, Disraeli could take an objective view of the growing British Empire, seeing its blemishes as well as its merits. He idealized it, and

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determined to shape it as a world force rather upon the lines of a feudal patriarchal body, in which benevolent government should meet with benevolent service. It was an aspiration which his instincts copied from some of the Old Testament prophets. But the personality of the man expressed that ideal in the most exuberant and oriental manner. What is so astonishing, is that he succeeded in putting himself finally in the place of spokesman of the English aristocracy and to some extent of the great and increasing mass of working folk. Yet here stood a dandy, a coiner of phrases and ceremonies, a most exotic plant which one would expect to shrivel instantly if exposed on the hustings of British politics.

These contradictions are manifest in his novels. It is perhaps difficult to read them today, but they remain the first essays in our fiction in which politics and public affairs are made to play an important and a dramatic part. Disraeli, from his first novel *Vivian Grey* (1826) to his last, *Endymion* (1880), in taste, and teaching, cut right across the English distinctions of class (and took a leap over the middle class, which he left to Gladstone's care!). He exercised a sly delight in lifting men of humble origin to the level of the feudal nobility (as for example, in *Sybil*, where the Earl of Mowbray is the son of a waiter; while *Sybil*, the heroine, is the daughter of a mill-worker whose ancestors were once owners of the lands on which the slum-town now stands). This confusion of social orders was deliberate. Disraeli knew himself for an outsider, and by his energy and genius set out to make capital from it. He succeeded both in politics and in fiction. Much of the piquancy and audacity of his books is due to this breaking down of the accepted barriers of English society. He pointed the way to an England somewhat vulgarized, in both senses of the word; a people freed from the restraints, the aristocratic and middle-class reserves and austerities, the mutual suspicions. He offered a prospect, as it were, of a sort of Butlin's Camp civilization, in which the amenities and fruits of an increasing wealth should be shared by all. The effect, as we have

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seen, has tended to a somewhat overcrowded playground, trying to fastidious nerves and refined tastes. It cannot be said that Disraeli possessed taste as we know it in Western Europe. He did not see eye to eye with Matthew Arnold on such matters, and he followed a shriller rather than a Higher Criticism. His prose style was modelled accordingly. And this, too, accounted for the streak of sensationalism in the incidents and situations of his fantastic tales. There is an artificiality in the atmosphere and texture of his work, comparable to that of the verse of Humbert Wolfe, a twentieth-century writer of some reputation, and a man of like origin, personal appearance, and brilliantly audacious intellect whose versatility was its own halter.

Equally baffling to the critic, as well as to the historian of the novel, is the work of Bulwer Lytton (1803-73), a writer who had immense success during his lifetime, but who today is even less read than Disraeli. Bulwer carried the historical novel, as developed by Scott, into the field of intellectual discussion. In so doing, he clogged its movement, and depressed its romance. That is why he is not much read today, for nothing so quickly goes out of fashion as ideas. His two most popular books, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and *The Last of the Barons* (1843) deserve survival, for they are rich in scholarship, mental range, vitality, and that historical imagination without which no delving into the past can be fruitful. He was a writer who could imitate anything. I would compare him to the composer Saint-Saëns whose opera *Samson and Delilah* has something of the colour of Bulwer's novels; a florid exuberance, streaks of dubious taste, and at times downright insincerity. He attempted the domestic novel (to catch the middle-class market) with *The Caxtons* (1850), and the tale of mystery in *A Strange Story* (1862). Towards the end of his literary life he cleared his prose style somewhat of its embossments and exuberances, but even so, the reader cannot wholly accept him as an artist in letters. As Saintsbury records, he was in his own day described as

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'the hummiest of bugs', a witticism that sums him up cruelly.

The success of the historical novel, as practised by Scott and Bulwer Lytton, caused many other writers to follow the rich vein. Most of them have been totally lost, but even now Charles Reade (1814-84), Charles Kingsley (1819-75), Harrison Ainsworth (1804-82) and Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848) hold their own against the overflowing stream of historical tales and tales of the sea. Charles Reade brought a modern technique to the task, for he wandered about in the Middle Ages and far regions of the world like a latterday journalist with a Leica camera. Circumstantial evidence was his strong suit, and for this he developed a method of work, sitting in his Knightsbridge house surrounded by card indexes, and file upon file of newspaper cuttings and blue-books. By this means he was enabled to produce a sense of verisimilitude that out-did Defoe. His novel *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861) by which he survives, is one of the great novels of the century, not because it is better and more intimately documented than Scott's *Quentin Durward*, which covers the same period of renaissance European history, but because of its wonderful vitality, its capturing of the variety and gusto of the scene in which the couple who are to become the parents of Erasmus meet and enact their chequered love-story.

Kingsley too had a boundless energy, but he was a prejudiced islander, wrapped in evangelical fervours that sometimes became bouts of hysteria. His historical novels are therefore warped, especially when he is presenting the activities of the Roman Church. In *Hypatia* (1853) he portrays the later stages of the conflict between the old gods of Olympus and the new evolution of the god-principle, Christ. It is interesting to compare his bias with the rich, nostalgic penetration of mood shown towards the same theme in the poems of Schiller, and in the one novel written by Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), a static study in which little happens except the ceaseless exfoliation

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of aesthetic mood in the few characters peopling the book; a mood reflected against the author's prose as a dying conflagration is bronzed against a cloudy night sky. As a novel, this Oxford monument is a failure, but it remains with a certain monolithic splendour, pointing the way to the novelists of a later age, amongst them Henry James, who were to be concerned more with the internal drama of the human spirit, than with that accident and combination of chance, which we call life.

Much more successful, as a solitary achievement, is the historical novel that summed up the spirit of the Oxford Movement against which Kingsley so savagely pitted himself. J. H. Shorthouse was a Birmingham business man, who had been caught by the genius of Cardinal Newman. All that remains of his literary activities is the long novel *John Inglesant* (1880), a study of the Civil War, and enriched with the demoniac, half-spurious scholarship that marked the intellectual life of the Renaissance. The picture of Oxford during the occupation by the peripatetic Court of Charles I is masterly. I would compare it with the picture of Cambridge during the neo-Platonic period a few years later, which occurs in *They Were Defeated*, by Rose Macaulay, a book which I should put amongst the finest historical novels in our language, and certainly an ornament to the fiction of our century.

Harrison Ainsworth may perhaps be called the English Dumas. He brought sensationalism and an atmosphere of the Chamber of Horrors into the historical novel. His first book *Rookwood* (1834) was, as he confessed in his preface, a throw-back to the lurid conjurings of Mrs Radcliffe. Here again was the haunted castle, the mysterious foreigner, the highwayman; all the Gothic trappings that Scott had taken up and used with such magnificence. Ainsworth went to Hoffman and Victor Hugo, particularly to the latter, in his evocation of the character of famous buildings, as in the novels *The Tower of London* (1840), *Old St. Paul's* (1841), and *Windsor Castle* (1843), all reflections of Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, but lacking the divine fire

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and the verbal splendour which made Hugo 'the greatest French poet, alas' as was said of him by a fastidious critic.

Captain Marryat can be included amongst the historical novelists who followed Scott, but it needs a stretch of the critic's net. He was more properly a disciple of Smollett, and took after him especially in the setting of his tales. His stories of the British navy during the hearts-of-oak period were written from first-hand knowledge, based on his own service in the French War and in the Far East. He had a vigorous style and humour, more amiable than that of Smollett, but also more juvenile, especially in his attitude towards women. The sight of an ample bosom made his nautical heart flutter, and his habit of treating women as 'the fair sex', with a manly grin as though in the proximity of a naughty story, has made his books more a province for adolescent than for adult taste. Two of his tales, *Masterman Ready* and *Children of the New Forest*, were expressly written for children, and are classics in that kind. He was a capital story-teller, and in his best books, the sea-tales *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836), *Peter Simple* (1834) and *Jacob Faithful* (1834) the combination of narrative speed, originality of theme, a broad humanity combined with his irresistible sense of fun (rather in the manner of Tom Hood), produced books that continue to delight both old and young readers through every change of literary fashion. The wooden hulks are gone, but the hearts of oak remain, prototypes for all subsequent writers of the sea and the men who adventure upon it in ships.

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We have now reached the heart of the forest, and our attention is turned this way and that, seeking to identify the positions, to relate one growth to another, and to trace, as far as we can, the various breeds which have evolved from that first seed-bed whose promissory characteristics were hinted at in the opening chapter of this little book. Again we have to remind ourselves, as we did when the mighty Dan Chaucer loomed up, that these great men of genius are not necessarily the most representative of the literature of the period, nor reflective of the taste and problems of their day. Often they are prophets, ahead of their time, makers of taste, and shapers of a whole or several generations of the cultural life of a people. Such was Shakespeare, and so again, in a slightly oblique degree, was Charles Dickens, whose elusive power and achievement we must now consider.

The difficulty about this phase in the history of the English novel is that this sudden constellation of major writers creates a fire in the sky and dims the light of the myriad smaller novelists who moved forward at the need of the expanding population, catering for the growing literacy through the agency of the lending libraries, pouring out a stream of fiction, good, bad, and indifferent, a flood whose power was in its mass. That stream never flags. Its bulk today is larger than ever, in spite of the momentary after-war lull in the demand for fiction.

It is these novelists, counted by the hundred, who move public opinion as the midgits of Lilliput moved Gulliver. But the study of them is a task rather for the sociologist

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than the literary critic. The latter's purpose is rather to isolate, in some degree of artifice, the representative figures on the one hand, and the innovating originals on the other, who keep the novel in a position of authority, above a mere social and utilitarian activity, upholding it as a reminder of its birth in poetry, and its marriage in that religious temper which alone maintains the human race above the drag of circumstance.

Such novelists stand as a law unto themselves, creating a universe of their own, with an idiom and a logic self-contained and immediately associated, each with the other. Out of this wholeness, as from a mirror, they reflect the world around them, but giving it a warp, a bias, which their genius persuades us to accept, because of its paradoxical presentation of truth. But the truth is *within that particular novelist's own equation*. If this is difficult to grasp, the reader should look at a picture by El Greco, and see there how the master's obliquity of vision contrives to give an aspect of the whole of human life, and to persuade us to accept it as real, if not as actual.

We have to approach Dickens in the same way. In a book of this kind and dimension it is impossible to study Dickens, or any other of the great novelists who with him made the golden age of English fiction during the nineteenth century. Three of them at least were so big and so various that they broke through the classifications into which the historian must necessarily divide the novel when studying its growth through the centuries. To consider their work here, therefore, is somewhat to confuse the pattern of our theme. They are like bulls in our neat little china-shop. But all the more welcome are they, for once again they bring the breath of life with them, and pull us out of the study and the class-room, urging us to share their vision and vitality, linking the novel with life, and identifying the characters spun from their genius, with the individuals who are part of our own lives.

All this is disturbing to our process; so too is the further factor of the influences from outside England, especially

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from America and Russia, and once again from France, which came with increasing force towards the end of the century. I doubt, indeed, if it is of much use further to pursue the arboreal image which I have adopted throughout the preceding chapters of this book. It becomes artificial and finicky as soon as it is used to contain such tremendous people and achievements as we now have reached. We have, however, seen the forest grow, and here are its giants around us, with their wonderful array, their mighty shadows, and a host of living beauty in their depths.

Of all novelists who have ever made a world of their own, and peopled it, Dickens is the most obvious. He began to write at a time when realism might have become a dominant, rising with the changes in society and glossing them with a criticism that would have been an irrefutable accusation. Its work as a method had already begun. But Dickens came and swept it all aside. Yet in his own way he made the criticism of society, and attacked the problems of the writhing industrialism which in its birth-pangs was contorting the whole fabric of Europe, and particularly of England. No novelist has had more direct influence as a reformer of certain abuses in public life. In all his instincts he was democratic; and he worked through instinct rather than through reason. His lower middle-class origin, his acquaintance with near-poverty, his passionate devotion to the *idea* of home-life, his idealization of woman and children, his sentimental streaks crossed with blatant vulgarity (especially in his moments of happiness); in all these aspects he reflected instantly and closely the characteristics of the new democracy which was breeding so rapidly. Yet he contrived to give it roots in an older English social order, so that we recognize a kind of cousinship between his famous characters and those of Fielding and Shakespeare.

No doubt his most direct monitors were Fielding and Smollett. But saying that, we at once realize the inadequacy, for is not Sterne to be found in him too, and

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Defoe? What is so astonishing, is that with all his faculty for evoking scene and idiosyncratic character, all his overtones of atmosphere and portent, he had none of the verbal fastidious *rightness* of the poet at his craft. He splashed his prose about like lime-wash, often in the most crude and garish colours. But here again the contradiction recurs, for in that violent method, he could present centres of stillness where eternity was revealed, lucid and firm, as in the character of Agnes in *David Copperfield*. This statement will aggravate many critics, for it is the fashion to deride Agnes as a prig. But Dickens is impervious to fashions, as he is impervious to good taste. He can make us blush for shame, he can make us angry as we weep at his melodrama, he can work up huge explosions of anger over social problems that he judges only from isolated hardships. But even so he makes us love him and his hundreds of creatures. For to hate Sykes, Fagin, Uriah Heep, Scrooge, and all the other villains, freaks, and misfits who whine and roar their way through his books, is really to love them, because they are tangible, they take us by the heart, and enlarge our acquaintance not only with humanity as it is, but as it might become if life should but take another slant.

Where is the critic to begin a consideration of the Dickens people? Is *Pickwick* the most representative, because he has sat down in almost every household in Europe and the New World? But if we make that claim, we at once hear Sam Weller shout from the kitchen, boot-brush in hand, or see Peggotty look up from her darning, or Aunt Betsy Trotwood's bucket ear-rings beginning to tremble with indignation. The riches are overwhelming. All that we can do is to acknowledge that Dickens stands at the head of all our novelists, in spite of what the higher critics may say, and in spite too of our own personal reservations.

Charles Dickens (1812-70) received his training in a practical school which recalls the methods of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838). It began in the improvident home-life which shadowed his infancy, the gloom spreading during the years when he might have been

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happily at school, for at that time his parents were for a while resident in the Marshalsea Prison for Debtors, and the boy had to make his way there each night from the blacking factory down below Adelphi Terrace, where he was able to indulge his self-pity and hyper-sensibility, characteristics common to genius. He envied and hated the worldly-wise, those people who made up the solid bulk of the middle class, cemented in their purse-proud family life, competent to handle money and all the responsibilities and authority dependent upon money. He never learned the trick. He made considerable wealth, but he spent it in a direct and innocent way, upon flashy waistcoats and all the other bright objects by which the pleasures of a person of genius are distinguished from those of a person of cultured talent.

He always kept a fellow-feeling with the poor, and when he met a man who had risen from poverty, such as Carlyle, he was predisposed to a clubbable regard; while towards the man who had started with an upper-middle-class education (as had Thackeray) he was inclined to show an aggressive and suspicious caution. In this he was not exceptional; but it influenced his casting of characters in his novels, and we find that the higher up the social tree they were placed, the more removed from warm humanity they became. Like most self-made men, Dickens never lost his fear of being penniless. This fear, working with his fine vanity and histrionic love of an audience (another characteristic of genius), made him constantly overwork, and killed him in the prime of life as he sat on the throne of a success never known before in the world of art.

He was the idol of the English-speaking world, and revered and imitated even beyond that. His influence, especially in Russia (notably on Gogol, Dostoevski, and Tolstoi) was enormous, for his vast emotionalism, his passionate absorption in *the people*, his distrust of the middle and upper classes, his love of gesture and declamation, all these features of his nature were to endear him to the Russians, as they had to the proletariat everywhere in the

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Europeanized world. Dickens thus made novel-reading a habit amongst people in every walk of life, and for the first time amongst the masses who hitherto had been content with *The Bible*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the news-sheets.

The boom began when Sam Weller appeared in the fifteenth number of *Pickwick Papers*. From a circulation of four hundred, and at a moment when Chapman and Hall, the publishers of the illustrated parts, were about to give up, the demand rose overnight to forty thousand and the publishers' embarrassment went to the other extreme. Dickens was now twenty-four, and from that time until his death thirty-four years later, he bade farewell to poverty, or at least banished her to the attics of his heart, whence from time to time, like the mad woman in *Jane Eyre*, she appeared at a window, or uttered a distant scream, that froze the blood of the master, and drove him to some extravagance whose reaction was to be overwork and finally death.

Technically, Dickens was the journalist *in excelsis*. After a few months as a boy in a solicitor's office in Gray's Inn, and at another in Lincoln's Inn, he learned shorthand and became a reporter on a newspaper, and then in the House of Commons. He began writing sketches for the *Morning Chronicle*, under the pen-name of Boz, which he had coined from the family-joking corruption of Moses, a nickname given to his brother, after the Moses in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. This is a clue to much of the derived nature of his literary manner, for I believe that an artist is moulded always by the first passionate influences of youthful enthusiasm. It seems that Goldsmith was common reading in the Dickens home, and can we not trace the effect in the ever-genial flow of Dickens's prose, his attitude towards his people, and indeed the whole preliminary stance of the writer as a writer?

In the first flush of success, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his Editor on the *Morning Chronicle*. It was a lukewarm marriage, and literary chatter

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about it, and the novelist's affection for two of his sisters-in-law, continues to exercise biographers. Dickens had a large family, and one of his great-grandchildren, Monica Dickens, is today a successful writer.

The large family, the training and habit as a journalist, the method of publishing his stories in monthly parts, sometimes two concurrently, these circumstances, emphasized by those manias referred to above, made Dickens a writer in a hurry, and we read in the biographies that at the end of his day's work he often broke into tears due to nervous hysteria. But even with this nagging pressure, the supply appeared to be inexhaustible. It was the transmitting machinery that broke down. In the last books as in the first, the wonderful characters sprang fully alive from the novelist's imagination. But in the later books we see the attempt to impose more form on the story (as in *Bleak House*), and to follow the fashion introduced by his younger contemporary Wilkie Collins (1824-89), who was also a personal friend.

Collins made an engineering job of the novel. He concentrated on plot from the mechanical point of view, his favourite device being to write in the first person through one character, then through another, so that different angles of perception and interpretation were offered. This was an adaptation of Richardson's epistolary form, brought up to date and given speed. But it created a sad series of jolts in the progress of the tale, and even *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, by which Collins's diminished fame survives, are marred by these series of jerks as the reader is asked to transmit himself from the point of view of one character in the book, to that of another. Further, Collins's training was in law, and he substituted legal situations for moral ones, a device that further robbed his tales of human verisimilitude. 'I can never lose the taste of construction,' said Trollope of him. That sums up his work, and explains why it is mostly forgotten. But the skill of the designer fascinated Dickens, because he was too impatient and too fecund to master it for himself. He tried,

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however, but it does not much add to the quality of his work. Later writers apprenticed themselves to Collins, notably Hall Caine and Marie Corelli, both writers whose books show a gap in my literary adventures. Thus I am unable to write about them, beyond recalling the fact that both writers were best-sellers in their day, and were much puffed up thereby. I must confess again that I have tried to read *The Sorrows of Satan*, by Marie Corelli, and *The Manxman*, by Hall Caine. An initial nausea prevented me from going far enough into the books to do them justice.

Dickens has come into this history and has slipped away again without my being able to grasp at his genius, and to show his influence. Both are so various and so widespread. English letters have not been the same since. He has in some degree changed the atmosphere of our national life. His people walk the streets, sit in church, theatre, and parliament, larger than life. The most unlikely people carry his chips on their shoulders; poets, statesmen, divines, lawyers, navvies, and charwomen. They all mention Dickens, and some of them quote him. The Dickens Fellowship today is a world-wide organization, and when I went down to Broadstairs (so much connected with him!) in the spring of 1949, to address an international Festival of the Fellowship, on the centenary of the publication of *David Copperfield*, I realized that I was present at a religious ceremony, and that the worshippers knew their manual of devotion by heart. I spoke accordingly: but I felt there, as I feel here, that I have been gazing from afar off, and that the critical estimate of Dickens's genius, his craftsmanship, and his contribution to and influence upon the English novel, are still unapproached. But their very elusiveness is part of their nature. We take it for granted in all considerations of the English novel, that Dickens is the most fecund, the most strange and original, yet the most familiar. The terror in the man, the warped and highly-strung intensity, carry his fundamental sanity and good nature, his enormous gift of overflowing humour; and there, in all his contradictions, he stands for ever.

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In comparison, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) is a figure in the flat, serene and peaceful. His great popularity has shrunk, and a new generation of readers, whose acquaintance is limited to *Vanity Fair* (1846-48) and *Esmond* (1852), may be unaware that his life was by no means a happy one, beginning with professional uncertainty, a confusion of purposes and false starts, to be followed by the loss of his private fortune and the insanity of his wife after the birth of two daughters. After an affluent childhood and youth, to have to live on the brink of the precipice is even worse than to start from poverty, as Dickens started, for the softly nurtured character is prone to take the frosts of fortune badly. Thackeray never complained, however, but set about to make his living as a journalist after abandoning the idea of becoming a cartoonist. His first books were not successful, for the public could make nothing of them. They hovered between a slightly facetious satire, concerned with class distinctions, and the spirit of realism which was soon to become his genius and make him so important a figure in the development of the English novel.

A Shabby Genteel Story (1839) is an example of his early form; a rambling semi-tale which seems, in retrospect, to be concerned largely with basement kitchens, seamstresses struggling with underpay and overwork (see Hood's *Song of the Shirt*), and powdered footmen; a depressing book. With *Barry Lyndon* (1843) he began to find himself, a self that had been set in the upper middle-class of Victorian England. His father was in the Indian Civil Service, and he received the conventional education, at Charterhouse and Trinity College, Cambridge. Then he studied art at Weimar and Paris, returning to England to begin his career in journalism, writing much for *Punch*, to which he contributed burlesques of Bulwer Lytton, whose romantic aggrandisement of the aristocracy he detested. *The Book of Snobs* (1846-47) and the *Yellowplush Papers* (1837-38) are books whose aim is shown in their titles: stuff that today is heavily dated, with the edge of the satire rusted, and the

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significance passed. *Barry Lyndon* marked the change in direction because it is the first of his books to be unified and recognizably coherent. It is the tale, in picaresque manner, of an Irish adventurer of the eighteenth century, one of those sword-happy stragglers who wandered about Europe after the extinction of the Stuart hopes in 1745, scrabbling a crust here and there by cards and the exploitation of women. Thackeray's temperament always tempted him to this desultory form, almost to the *causerie*, a habit of mind aggravated by the needs and methods of journalism. He was not, like Dickens, driven by a demon. In fact, he made efforts from time to time to find an official job which would lead to his escape from the writer's itch. Fortunately, he was not successful, for had he obtained the position in the Post Office, for which he applied, it is certain that he would not have augmented his job, as did Trollope, by three hours' steady literary work every morning before going to the office.

But the need for such lobbying in Government offices disappeared with the publication of *Vanity Fair* (1846-48). It was instantly successful, and made Thackeray a figure in the literary world of a stature comparable to that of Dickens. He was made first Editor of the new *Cornhill Magazine*, in which Trollope found fame. Thackeray's efforts at writing serial tales for the *Cornhill* were disappointing, but he made up for it by his regular provision of garrulous essays under the title of *Roundabout Papers* (a most characteristic one!). This habit of meandering, of taking the reader into his confidence about the work in hand, was at times maddening; more so today, since the discipline of technique in the art of the novel has been so much tightened up, to the exclusion of the face and form of the author. This legato continuity of mood, half reminiscent, joined Thackeray's novels one with another, giving him scope to indulge his preoccupation with the structure of family life. The marriages, the descendants and antecedents, the cousinships first, second, and third, link his characters, carrying them from book to book, until the reader can

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hardly see the wood for the family trees. This device makes him, in the long run, an author to whom one becomes addicted, as within a closed society. His clubbability is enormous, and the tendency is to forget, as he himself forgot, that there is a vast mass of human life outside this charmed circle, people of the 'lower orders' (we have nowadays to put the phrase in inverted commas), whose drama we may either ignore or treat with amused condescension. Thackeray was never aware of the danger, or the wickedness, of this attitude, for he represented a class that lived upon artificial assumptions, and wore blinkers which Dickens made it his job to strip off. Within that almost family circle, however, Thackeray had deployed in *Vanity Fair* a contemporary realism, further to be developed in *Pendennis* (1848-50) and *The Newcomes* (1855), which set the mode of fiction in general from that time onwards to the present day.

In *Vanity Fair* this realism is applied to the historical method. But it showed its approach by avoiding the heroic figures and moments. Thackeray rightly called his great book (surely one of the most important novels, from every point of view, in our language) a 'novel without a hero'. Thus the muse of history is similarly treated. We are not shown the field of Waterloo, but the perturbations of social life in Brussels during the weeks preceding the battle: the preliminaries in London, in the political and financial worlds, or at least in the houses of their women-folk in Belgravia. For the second time in fiction, we find an author accepting the world as he found it, Thackeray going direct to Fielding for the formula, or rather the decision to have no formula. With a lofty ethical standard, he refused to allow any of his characters to be embodiments of that standard. Their efforts to conform to it, to pretend to it, to avoid it, are what interested him, and he pictured them in all their resolutions and failings, wart by wart, but without the violence of caricature or the distortion of satire. Here were human beings as we know them, the gentle and dull Amelia, the tricky, vain, charming Becky Sharp.

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Even the villain of the piece, Lord Steyne, was true to life. Indeed, he was painted from life, the model being the old Regency buck the Marquis of Hertford. Over all this vast concourse of mortals, for Thackeray's stage, like his life, was always crowded; and over all the rich scene painting, there flows the almost engulfing prose whose style is so marked. Today, it is somewhat too button-holing and familiar for our taste. But even allowing for this change in fashion, the quality of Thackeray's periods especially when they rise out of the garrulous to the high-dramatic, are as magnificent as the music of Handel. The ball-scene in Brussels on the Eve of Waterloo is one of the greatest in all fiction. So too is the moment where Becky Sharp is surprised by her husband Rawdon Crawley, in a compromising moment with Lord Steyne, and is stripped of her jewellery as a preliminary to the overthrow of all her elaborate social schemings. Thackeray was showing individuals, and not types. Their character and conduct cut right across the author's own social preconceptions (as rarely happened in Dickens's books).

Further, in turning to the historical scene, Thackeray declared that 'the Muse of History hath encumbered herself with ceremony as well as her Sister of the Theatre. . . . I would have history familiar rather than heroic: and I think that Mr Hogarth and Mr Fielding will give our children a much better idea of the manners of the present age in England, than the *Court Gazette* and the newspapers which we get thence'. This detached realism, with no romantic addition to the virtuous poor or the noble rich, showed Thackeray's middle-class origin, just as Dickens's over-emotional typifying of characters betrayed that hot-bed closeness of his childhood in the small home, where the family is huddled together, fearful and suspicious of the outside world that threatens starvation and slavery.

That quotation from the preface to *Esmond* is followed by the most perfectly constructed of all Thackeray's books. It is a noble work of art, a unity not only in form but in harmony and colour. This book, with its sequel *The*

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Virginians, paints a perfect period picture of the age of Addison, Johnson, and Pope. The very style is in keeping, sentence by sentence. But this perfection has a certain remoteness, and I find my enthusiasm turning rather to *Pendennis* and its sequel *The Newcomes*, in which the genius of Thackeray is at its ripest, so urbane, so genial, tender, and penetrating. Here the English scene, and particularly the London scene of the mid-nineteenth century, is conjured in such fullness that we live there, and know and love the people whose commonplace lives float along the stream of time, tied by bonds of family or passion, checked in the whirlpools of accident and seeming chance, and coming at last to the open sea of eternal rest. There is about these books the sadness which covers all great things, an overtone which we cannot define, except by the abused word *eternity*. A more expert analyst of the work of Thackeray might say that this overtone, gathering fully towards the end of his life-work, was a vast equability of temper, a personal trait which gave the semblance of detachment, but was in reality an almost godlike compassion.

Meanwhile, out in the world beyond Mayfair and the London Clubs, the shape of English society was melting in the furnace as the fires of the industrial revolution grew fiercer. Everything was being questioned, and so many things, especially in the religious and moral world, which had been taken for granted, were now being attacked. Once again the need of the moment, a great need and a dramatic moment, found a spokesman whose temperament and genius were congenial to the public mood. The novel could now take its place seriously as a vehicle for social criticism as well as for mere entertainment. It could serve a purpose among the older monitors of society, the Church and Parliament, and with this in view, there came a novelist who worked under the burden of a heavy sense of responsibility. That is why we have to consider George Eliot (the pen-name of Mary Ann Evans, 1819-80) following the release by Thackeray of the technique of realism for dealing with contemporary life. George Eliot took the

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technique further by using it not only to present the contemporary scene, but also to work *scientifically* upon the anatomy of the human mind, exploring motives as well as actions, and displaying the fruits of her research with a grave, deliberate impartiality. The effect of this was to intimidate Victorian England. Something so unimpassioned had never been known before. Here was circumstantial evidence embodied into a sort of angel of judgement, forcing her way into the very moods and fancies by which our vagaries of conduct are preceded, the seed-beds of temptation, the cradles of sin.

The immediate result was a deification of this woman (for it was soon discovered, and by Dickens, that the pen-name was a purposeful concealment of the sex of the author), and throughout the rest of her career she was looked upon as a Sibyl, a Cassandra, almost as the Eleusinian Oracle, to whose salon the best and most serious brains of the century came with homage, in spite of the fact that she was living with a man to whom she was not married! Her seat was set too high for the tide of scandal to lap at it, though amongst some of her family connexions she was looked at askance, as the present writer knows, being a distant kinsman, with lifelong memories of a certain hushed legend.

Mary Ann Evans was a native of Warwickshire, her father being agent for several landed proprietors in the county. She lost her mother in early life, and was sent to school at Coventry, where she met certain intellectuals of the new trend of thought, who broke down her hitherto unquestioned evangelical Christian faith. Her spasms of conscience over this seeming treachery to her whole world, as she had known it, never left her. The moral code of that world remained to torment her until her death (no doubt it dictated her somewhat ridiculous marriage a few months before her death, to a Mr Cross), and to drive her to Laocoon-like struggles with her own rich, positive nature and powerful intellect. What is more important, it was the motive force of her novels, filling them with that humanism

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and sense of ethical duty which made them secular sermons for a vast congregation of readers who could no more subscribe to Christian codes, but were willing to accept the discipline demanded by the New Thought, as preached by the Frenchman Auguste Comte, and his English disciple George Henry Lewes.

Lewes was a journalist-philosopher, who wrote a History of Philosophy, and a life of Goethe that is one of the finest biographies in our language. The triangular complications of his married life made divorce impossible, and for this reason he and Mary Ann Evans lived together, she acting as mother to his young sons and financing their education. Lewes not only gave a sanction and ethical form to her unanchored moral sense; he also led her, by his faith in her literary ability, to link that sense with her more naturally emotional faculties. It was this guidance that made her a novelist.

She was a woman of great intellectual power and range, moving about with ease amongst the abstractions of philosophy and general science, while serving her own personality, much nearer the earth, with a sage gravity and humour. In general she was a sombre spirit, too firmly reined by a conviction of duty. Most of her working life was a propitiation towards the God whom she had denied, and the society of man whose convictions she had flouted by her illicit union, a deliberate and serious union, with Lewes. Her duty towards Duty, she felt, was threefold; because of duty's sake, and because twice in her life she had seemingly betrayed it. This self-imposed burden gave a heaviness to her personality and to her novels. Both tended to lack aeration. It is false, however, to suppose that she lacked humour. The dialogue in her books, the late as well as the early ones, is shot with wry touches and gleams, warm rustic turns of speech half Biblical, half Shakespearean, yet wholly first hand and fragrant of the folk from whom she sprang (if one can imagine George Eliot springing!).

In this quality, she was a forerunner of Thomas Hardy,

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as also in her sense of doom-in-character, and her rich fabric of bucolic weave. Her description of the somewhat pitiable clergyman-pedant Mr Casaubon, in her greatest, if not her most perfect novel, *Middlemarch* (1872), is a searching self-portrait too.

‘It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self, never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted.’

But we have to realize that in thus describing a state of character so near to her own, she was able to be conscious of it, to externalize its influence, and in some way to escape its destiny. For though it is true that she too was ‘never fully possessed of the glory she beheld’, it was this that made her a sort of Moses to the Victorian Age, leading it to the Promised Land of full intellectual, moral, and political freedom, even though the results of its entering upon that inheritance have been similar to those that overtook the Jews after entering over Jordan. George Eliot was always conscious that ‘we are on a perilous margin when we begin to look passively at our future selves, and to see our own figures led with dull consent into insipid misdoing and shabby achievement’.

There was neither dull consent in this remarkable woman, nor shabby achievement in her work. The adulation which she received in her lifetime has led to the inevitable reaction, and for nearly half a century she has been underrated, in spite of the fact that her contribution to the English novel has been so ample, and her influence upon its development so timely and so significant.

Middlemarch is one of the greatest essays in our fiction, as *Silas Marner* (1861) is one of the most perfect. Her first full-

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length book *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) which followed it, are rich in a close contact with the people of the Midlands, simple yet subtle country folk to whose limited scholarship and intellectual scope she submitted herself humbly and lovingly, using her own freer and more widely cultivated mind as commentator in all charity and understanding. She had the spirit of charity in the true, Pauline sense of the word, and by means of this, she could understand all things, pardon all things, and leave the judgement to circumstance.

But how relentlessly she manipulated that circumstance, bringing to its inexorableness all the remorse and guilt-feeling of her own nature, making the universe her hair-shirt, and time and space the flagellators. A slip in conduct, and the consequences are always dire, not only outwardly, but also in the deterioration of moral fibre in the person who succumbs to a moment of weakness or selfish indulgence. We see, for example, how a brilliant young Renaissance intellectual, Tito Melema, in the historical novel *Romola* (with the same setting as Merejkowski's *The Forerunner*) slips gradually but surely from a graceful youth to a criminal maturity, embodying all the craft and violence of those Machiavellian days of the small City-States in Tuscany. So too, Dr Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, whom we meet as a man likely to do big things in the world of medicine, makes the mistake of marrying a vain and selfish girl because of her physical beauty. She runs him into debt, and from that he is forced to descend in his aims, and to compromise in his professional integrity. From a man of science (the noblest thing George Eliot could conceive of) he becomes merely a fashionable physician, frustrated and cynical.

All this criticism of life, so firmly underlined, George Eliot achieved with a few novels written after the age of thirty-five. Previous to that she had worked as a journalist and translator (she began her professional career by translating Strauss's *Life of Jesus*), serving her apprenticeship to letters on *The Westminster Review*, and thus meeting the

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intellectuals of the day, amongst them Herbert Spencer, with whom her name was associated for some time, in a more than philosophic connexion. She seemed always to command adulation. Jowett, the Platonist and Master of Balliol, and Mr Gladstone, Prime Minister of Liberal England, were among those who knelt.

Few kneel today. But her work remains to be rediscovered, in all its firm architecture (*Middlemarch* is a wonderful structure, with four character-groupings woven into a single plot), its noble humanism, its scholarship, criticism of life and the arts, politics, and science, its vivid pictures of an England during the years of the industrial tumescence. She prepared the way for Hardy and Meredith, and when one returns to her books after reading theirs, so rich in poetic content, one is inclined to question if, apart from this quality of grace, these two masters are after all any greater than George Eliot.

It is symptomatic of our time that today the enthusiastic attention is given not to George Eliot but to a Victorian novelist of much smaller pretension, one more docile in intellectual temper, and more conventional in moral habit. Anthony Trollope (1815-82) may be called a disciple of Thackeray exploiting what Henry James called 'a genius for the usual'. Second thoughts about him reveal qualities that recall not a little the conciseness of texture of Jane Austen, the determination of characters within a prescribed field, the avoidance of abstract problems, philosophical grandeurs, poetic afflatus. He knew much more about the world of affairs than Jane Austen, for he was an administrative official in the Post Office, and moved about the British Isles freely in the pursuit of his duties. Further, his childhood had been harassed by family troubles, for his father was a barrister of odd temper and bad health, a failure in his profession, and doomed to be kept and nursed by his wife, an indomitable woman who for this purpose took to writing at the age of fifty-five and made a successful career, turning out over a hundred books before she laid down her pen, and at the same time bringing up, in England

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and later in Belgium, her several children. This story is told vividly in Trollope's *Autobiography*, a characteristic piece of work that shows the vigour, the downright honesty, the capable and patient integrity (somewhat lacking in fantasy and charm) which tincture the objective scene of his novels.

Trollope was nineteen when he entered the Civil Service. He took the work seriously, and not as a sinecure. It was he who introduced the pillar-box for posting letters, now a world-wide feature of civilization. Every day before going to work he got up at six o'clock and wrote for three hours, at the rate of a thousand words an hour, timed by his watch on the desk before him. After finishing one three-decker, he began another the next morning. This admirable professional address to the art of letters produced a huge body of fiction, some of it pedestrian and dull, most of it on a level that has kept it above the flood of oblivion. His best books, the Barsetshire series, begin with *The Warden* (1855), his nearest approach to poetic atmosphere, and continue with *Barchester Towers* (1857), *Dr Thorne* (1858), *Framley Parsonage* (1861), *The Small House at Allington* (1864), and the *Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867). These books brought him success after the failure of several with an Irish setting, the fruits of an official appointment in Ireland, where he learned to hunt (the passion of his life) and shook off a certain social and physical gaucherie which had hitherto made him rather an oaf. He never knew intimately the life and milieu of the clerical world. His duties took him to the south-west country and the cathedral cities there; but his only contact with the clergy was in the somewhat off-guard and unceremonious ease of the coffee-room of The Athenaeum. That may explain why his pictures of clerical life are so different from those painted by George Eliot. The worldly side predominates, with the seeking for and expectancy of office ever in the foreground; and that foreground raked by fire from the female ordnance in the episcopal and archdiaconal bedrooms and boudoirs.

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Trollope's range was not limited to this, however. He travelled all over the world, sent on missions connected with international postal agreement.

Retiring from the Post Office in 1864, he wrote several travel books, and a number of novels concerned with the political scene: *Phineas Finn* (1869), *Phineas Redux* (1873), and *The Prime Minister* (1876). The last may usefully be compared with *The Marriage of William Ashe*, by Mrs Humphry Ward, as a picture of Governmental circles in the Victorian Age. Two novels which remain favourites today are *Orley Farm* (1862) and *The Claverings* (1867).

The publication of the *Autobiography* in 1883, at the height of his popularity, did Trollope an ill-service, thereby showing once again that he never fully concealed a certain naïvety and lack of worldly self-interest. In the eighties, the 'Grosvenor Gallery, greenery-yallery' fashion had set in, with Oscar Wilde walking down Piccadilly with a lily in his hand. Walter Pater was the deity of the moment, and it was thought *de rigueur* to write like him, every sentence revised a dozen times, in the search for the immaculate word. Here came Trollope confessing that he worked like a bricklayer, so many bricks a day, then down tools! It was an insult to literature, just as in our time it has been an insult to write poetry that is instantly intelligible and unadorned with a dozen or so concealed quotations from and allusions to forgotten minor writers of the past, and pendant with tags in several other tongues than English.

Trollope punched a hole right through his own fame. Not until between the two World Wars was he rediscovered, and found to be a major novelist of distinctive flavour and a massive sagacity.

His value as a factor in the historical and aesthetic development of the English novel is that he walks solidly (one can hear his footfall) down the middle of the road of tradition. For tradition had by this time been established. How to define it I do not know. Its chief characteristic is that it is indefinable. It is largely unconcerned with

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literary form, and even with a consciousness of prose style. One of the demerits and weaknesses of our present-day critics is that they seek to make too much of a cult of this pursuit of something called Form (almost a platonic ideal) in the novel, and to force its massive vitality into a narrow channel. And this is being done at a time when the material of the novelist, human society, is in a process of flux. It is as though this elaborate cultivation of artifice and style in the novel is a counsel of despair and bewilderment, a deliberate attempt to confirm at least one phenomenon of contemporary life which shall be formal and aristocratic.

But the English novel never has been, in the main, aristocratic. When practised by certain poets here and there, it has had a tendency to exclusiveness in taste, intellectual symbolism, and verbal shape: but generally the novel is an art of the middle classes and latterly of the proletariat too; if the modern proletariat can be said to have an art.

Trollope's novels exemplify that norm of English life; the solid middle class and professional cadre, out of which the substance, if not the rarer flowers, of our national culture has perennially emerged. Its economic range is large. Dickens stands at one end of it, Thackeray and Trollope at another. Fielding and Richardson also stand at the two extremes, though Fielding might be said to have a footing amongst the nobility. But for purposes of our present consideration, I should put both the landed gentry and the ruling professional folk amongst the middle class. They all subscribe, in their way of life, to the general atmosphere, the moral code, the standards of taste and conduct, the recognitions, out of which the English novel in general has sprung. That is the only formality I can see in this particular vehicle of our national genius. To confine it more than that, is to enslave it to certain conventions of mind and consciousness that come from the intellectual geometry of the French spirit, or the intellectual snobbery of the New England revolt against its own backwardness. This last has been in the ascendancy here since the be-

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ginning of the cult of Henry James and other uprooted Americans who have fled from their native land in terror of its vast potential and its present materialist, outpost culture.

The present-day enthusiasm for the novels of Trollope may be a sign that the public is weary of this monitorship of self-exiles from across the Atlantic. But this is a matter to discuss later, when considering the work and influence of Henry James, forces that we can set over against the solidity of Anthony Trollope's contribution, not entirely to his detriment. There may be in his work a certain reluctance to face the deeper problems of the turmoils and cravings of the human spirit. There are certainly restrictions of sensibility and capacity for nice analysis of motive. These are limitations in the novels of Trollope. But they are limitations general to the majority of people, and their absence is not noticed: just as the presence in Dickens's work of a wild, despairing fantasy is not noticed by the mass of readers. But it is to be observed that Trollope noticed it, and criticized it as something away from the healthy normal after which he strove far more consciously than critics, at least the critics who patronize him, are aware. Hints here and there (as in the character of the Warden himself) reveal in the bluff, masculine character of Trollope something finer, more sharpened, than at first is apparent. It is this that gives his work a distinction, and his characters definition. It makes him a major novelist, one to be signalled among the giants of the nineteenth century, and recognized as no small contributor to the general shape and colour of the English novel.

A more questioning attitude towards social conditions and criticism of the work done by the Established Church for their amelioration, was taken by a number of novelists, a new generation of those smaller writers whose virtue is their closeness to the spirit of the times and its problems. One or two of them wrote with sufficient artistry to give their work a chance of survival. Outstanding among them was Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell, a London-born woman

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who married a Unitarian minister of Manchester. She thus came to the industrial north from outside, and the shock made a lasting impression. In *Mary Barton* (1848, the year of European unrest and frustrated revolutions), she brought to the novel the drama of the new conflicts between masters and men, the shame of factory conditions, the dangers of tumid growth in the population of the manufacturing towns and the denudation of the agricultural countryside. Her friendship with Dickens (she worked for him on *Household Words*) is patent in her writing, though she controlled her imagination and her anger far more effectively than any other of the critics of the abuses which were accepted so complacently as part of the machinery for piling up wealth. In *Cranford* (1853) she escaped for a while from the horrors of Manchester *laissez-faire* industrial life, to paint a picture of the annals of a typical English village in which the squire, the parson, and the manners of the eighteenth century were still undisturbed in their places, though the writings of a young man named Dickens were being discussed in one or two drawing-rooms. Moderation of temper, sweetness of mood, gave this book a fragrance which it still keeps, though the rural society, a survival of that portrayed by Jane Austen, has long since vanished. Its influence remains, too, for even today, from a countryside where the parish-pump has given place to the gasoline station, and the congregations are found rather in the cinemas and road-houses than in the ancient churches, there comes a flood of nostalgic fiction and semi-fiction whose chief ingredient is this cup-of-kindness receipt perfected by Mrs Gaskell.

The religious reaction against that complacency within the Church which we see in Trollope's novels, was voiced by writers in the High and Low Church movements. *John Inglesant* has already been referred to in the previous chapter. Another novelist who spoke for the Oxford Movement was Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901), who lived in the village where John Keble, one of the leaders of the Movement, was vicar. Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*

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(1853) and another once-popular novel called *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1857) by Mrs Craik, show respectively the impingement of a High Church conscience and a Low Church conscience upon the better spirits in the middle-class society, whose enrichment in commercial matters was being accompanied here and there by sinister misgivings. Those misgivings have since been justified, for today the survivors of that middle class are paying for the clumsy greed with which their forebears mishandled the possibilities offered by the advent of the machine and the powers of science. Cardinal Newman, with Shorthouse as his spokesman in fiction, and Frederick D. Maurice, for whom Charles Kingsley spoke in such novels as *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850), put their mark as spiritual remembrancers upon the whole of the important fiction of the middle of the nineteenth century, when matter and manner were both in the melting-pot, and the novel as we know it today in its most general manifestations was taking a later shape. Kingsley's fervour and lyrical eloquence, rising at times to a hysterical vagueness and broken tones, nevertheless touched the root of the social sores which were festering so rapidly.

Meanwhile, the indestructible spirit of romance, and the obstinate thread of eccentricity, which have never disappeared from the story of English letters (even in the eighteenth century) carried on over the broken roads of social upheaval and threatened revolution. George Borrow (1803-81) is a good example of the eccentric still at work. He can hardly be called a novelist, for his books purport to be autobiographical; but the element of fiction in them is probably higher than that of fact. He pretended to much knowledge that he did not possess. He claimed to be a 'master of languages'; hence the title of his most famous book, *Lavengro* (1851) which is supposed to be a gypsy word meaning Word Master. This book, with its sequel *Romany Rye* (1857), is the highly picturesque story of the author's life as a child in East Anglia, a literary aspirant and failure in London, a vagrant over the English country-

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side where he falls in with gypsy bands and is befriended by them. The style is odd; it has a Biblical directness and poetic imagery. It can be as bald as the narrative style of Defoe. It can flare up into a most powerful descriptive prose, as in the account of the fight with The Flaming Tinman in the dell (*Lavengro*). There is much artfulness behind the apparent naïvety and man-to-man confidence of the author's manner. But he commands attention and even enthusiasm, and may be called the father of a school of semi-fictional writers all of whom find a rich mine of interest in their own personalities acting as a sort of reagent for testing the credentials of the world in which they delight to wander and exhibit themselves. The method is an adaptation, in subjective terms, of the adventures of Don Quixote, that ghost who will never be laid!

The open air ('To the right, or to the left, said I!' is a favourite exclamation of Borrow, while on the road) plays an ever more nostalgic part in English fiction, as readers and writers tend to be immured more inescapably in cities. R. D. Blackmore (1825-1900), a West Country man who became a market gardener, fed this need during the nineteenth century with a series of novels of which one survives. Every fiction addict knows *Lorna Doone* (1869), and its muscular hero John Ridd. Here was history, romance, and the open air in conjunction, spiced with a record of valour and great deeds in the manner of Douglas Fairbanks. Unique in his books was a lively preoccupation with climatic conditions. We have the great snowstorm in *Lorna Doone*, the drought in *Clara Vaughan*, with its blowing sands, the storm over the coast in *Cradock Norwell* (a tale of twin brothers). We can trace his influence in the early novels of Eden Phillpots (born 1862), a Devonshire man who has spent a long and fertile literary life in his home-place, recording its riches of place and person through verse and prose of sterling worth. L. A. G. Strong, of a still younger generation than Phillpots, is another novelist whose work is saturated with the spirit of place (Devonshire, Ireland, the Scottish isles), and is tense with the

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drama of a conflict between this spirit and the personalities of the characters in his books.

Having referred to the survival of the romantic attitude in fiction, and the cultivation of the spirit of place as a dramatic dominant, the moment has now come to look at the Brontë family, that parsonage-ful of unaccountable ability, nerves, and ill-health. So much has been written about the Brontës, both by English and French critics, that the theme becomes trite in one's hands. The most recent critic, and the sanest and most understanding, is the Yorkshire novelist Phyllis Bentley, herself a much-respected artist in this medium, one whose regional novels of the West Riding and the Pennines will maintain her reputation along with that of others of her kind, Eden Phillpots, Francis Brett Young (the novelist of Worcestershire), Mary Webb (Shropshire), Storm Jameson (East Riding), Adrian Bell (East Anglia). These are of our own time, sane survivals of people with a faith in locality, and the importance of those affairs 'unto a little clan' which will survive, let us hope, the most heady ideologies and the tamperings of political zealots.

The late Romer Wilson, who promised to be a novelist of genius, wrote a remarkable study of Emily Brontë and her world, in *All Alone* (1928). May Sinclair, still earlier, in 1912 wrote a study of the three sisters, as also did the French critic Ernest Dimnet in 1928. The flood began with Elizabeth Gaskell's life of Charlotte Brontë in 1857, two years after her death. These are only a few of the studies that throw further beams of light on the already dazzling, if smoky, bonfire of genius which sprang up in that Yorkshire parsonage, and still smoulders there in spite of the drenchings of time and changing circumstance.

Patrick Brontë, a temperamental Irishman, frustrated by some kink in his character from fulfilling his intellectual promise, sunken into morbid self-communion through grief for the loss of his Cornish wife, and left to bring up five daughters and a son in a remote Pennine village, his only neighbours the barbaric mining community, is the

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central figure on the stage. The four elder girls being sent to a boarding school, two of them died of an epidemic, and the others were brought back to Haworth Rectory, where their education was carried on by themselves, with fitful aid from father, and the errant instruction of wind, rock, and water. The children set up worlds of their own, Charlotte and her brother Branwell (soon to die of drink and boredom) inventing one called *Angria*, a pure fairyland; the other, inhabited by the younger sisters Emily and Anne, a more grim and moral estate called *Gondal*. All of them wrote copiously of adventures in these imaginary countries, the records being kept in microscopic calligraphies, examples of which can now be seen in the British Museum. There was no other outlet for the girls. Branwell, being male, was able to find a way out at the village inn, and there the alienists and psychologists continue to follow him, in the effort to unveil the secret, if there was a secret, of his warped personality.

The girls turned to professional writing, and in spite of their ignorance of the world, they launched a book of still-born poems, and then three novels in the year 1847; *Jane Eyre*, by Currer Bell (Charlotte), *Wuthering Heights* by Ellis Bell (Emily), and *Agnes Grey*, by Acton Bell (Anne). Charlotte's book was an instant success, and it led to her being drawn out of the parsonage and introduced to the world, and to her idol Thackeray, to whom she dedicated the second impression of *Jane Eyre*. Anne's contribution is gentle, derivative, and can be neglected. She died soon after of a decline. Emily died in the following year, 1848.

Charlotte next tried to take Thackeray's advice to write a novel in the manner of Jane Austen. No doubt he was embarrassed by the completely new element of displayed passion, female passion, in *Jane Eyre*; something hitherto unknown in fiction. Charlotte published *Shirley* (1849), which showed that Thackeray might as well have asked Marlowe to write *The Rape of the Lock*. The central character, or monolith, in *Shirley*, is a portrait of Emily Brontë; enough to blow any circumspect plot to pieces! The

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father Patrick, is also portrayed in this tale, and there again is a figure incompatible with a docile society. Charlotte, full of the close prejudices due to a combination of ignorance and innocence, with no experience of social intercourse and its infinite skills, harassed by a half-celtic inner demon, now deployed her powers on a wider if less intense theme, in *Villette* (1853) in which is embedded the tale of her unrequited passion for the Belgian professor, Héger, with whom she came into contact during her stay in Brussels, where she taught English in a girls' school. While showing the influence of Thackeray, *Villette* is still flooded by the impulsive genius which fills *Jane Eyre*; but in *Villette* this motive force is more controlled, more continuous, more related to the comings and goings of daily human life. For this reason, I find *Villette* the more satisfying novel. *Jane Eyre* is a lyrical poem, the kind of poem written only in adolescence, when excess is all, and restraint is felt to be a self-betrayal.

Still more is this true of *Wuthering Heights*, one of the most odd and unplaceable works in the whole of English fiction. Emily's reliance upon her own inner light was even more marked. The fury of her cravings for she knew not what, forged a handful of primary symbols through which she attempted to interpret the promptings of her nature, at the same time crying out against her failure. The cry is long, wild, eerie, like the mourning of plovers at the end of a savage winter day, a day too short to offer warmth, except for one lurid gleam across the west as the sun goes down unseen. Dying at the age of thirty, Emily was unable to fulfil her promise of powerful intellectual grasp, and an almost Faustian attitude to the world of knowledge and affairs. Certainly this wild tale of spiritual affinity between a girl and a boy, both creatures rebelling against the confines of human nature, would not have been the last attack to come from this remarkable genius. She left also a handful of poems which take their place amongst the most intense utterance in our language. Blake was not more stark. *Wuthering Heights* remains a lonely peak in the

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landscape of the English novel, where generation after generation of emotional adventurers will climb, to find at the top a handful of scree, a thornbush in the wind, a hawk hovering, and nothing else. The enigma remains, and it is for ever alluring. Matthew Arnold, who had met Charlotte at the house of Quillinan, Wordsworth's son-in-law, two years before her death, wrote an elegy, a lame-rhythm piece, that contains however a fitting description of the enigma in Emily's nature and work.

'How shall I sing her, whose soul
Knew no fellow for might,
Passion, vehemence, grief,
Daring, since Byron died,
That world-famed son of fire – she, who sank
Baffled, unknown, self-consumed;
Whose too bold dying song
Stirr'd, like a clarion-blast, my soul.'

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It is inevitable that, unless the historian is to fall into the risk of becoming a bore, the story of the novel from this date should be confined, as far as possible, to those figures who are representative of the general trends. The number of practising novelists is ever multiplying upon a diet of democratic education and widespread literacy. The lending libraries also increase in size and number, with the result that today most novelists make a half-living by books which the public borrows but does not buy. The purveying of fiction has become an industry, steady and regular, fluctuating not through aesthetic but economic changes of tide. Riding these tides, however, we see here and there a writer who has something original to contribute to the growth of the novel, maintaining its aspirations as an art-form and as an interpreter of life. It is these figures, likely to be permanent, with whom my survey of the English novel must draw to an inconclusive end; inconclusive, because the novel may not even yet have fully been explored as a vehicle of human inquiry and self-expression.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the novel was dominated by the giant personalities of Dickens and George Eliot. That influence has not yet died away, though it is often given other names and attributed to other causes. The first decade of the second half of the century was rich in books which have survived. Among them is one of the greatest school-tales in our language, a pattern for so many that have come after. *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, by Thomas Hughes, published in 1857, pictured

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Rugby during the astringent rule of Thomas Arnold, a rule that frost-nipped the genius of that Headmaster's own son Arnold, and thus warped the final shape of a body of poetry which might have taken its place amongst the greatest in our English Pantheon. School and college have, ever since the publication of Hughes's book, offered a suitable setting for many writers to explore the psychology of childhood and youth more closely. Setting out from this stage, in a study of a young clerk in holy orders at Oxford, Mrs Humphry Ward (1851-1920), a niece of Matthew Arnold, carried in *Robert Elsmere* (1888) the problems of the adolescent conscience and sensibility out to the larger world, at the time when religious doubts and reactions of faith were tearing at each other, to the accompaniment of the hammers of industry, and the ironic laughter of a too-confident body of scientists.

This influence of contemporary conflicts, of ideas and beliefs, was from that time so enormous that the novel bulged in every direction. No longer could a Jane Austen have confined herself to material that might be moulded into patterns of Mozart-like precision. The form of the novel henceforth must again be likened to that of a string-bag, into which the zealous controversialist could thrust his packages of dogma, prejudice, recent discovery, speculation on the future, regardless of the final shape, and the incongruity of the parts in the swollen fardel. The critic too is caught up in the resultant state of aesthetic anarchy, and can no longer attempt to define the novel as a work of art. The floods are out, and it is only today, a century later, that we see the high waters receding, to leave the forest of fiction looking much tumbled and muddled, but surviving through its own débris.

It remains to look at the rest of that forest, with other giants who arose before the flood covered all. That flood was the expression of a new surge of social vitality consequent upon the release of ideas through the French Revolution, the rise of democratic ideas, and the enormous expansion of physical wealth following the coming of the

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machine. Fear of this power stirred the Christian Churches, and fear of them stirred a corresponding attack from the expositors of free-thought. Mrs Humphry Ward was active in using the novel to voice the outcry of the tortured and frightened Church. But she used the methods of an opponent, George Eliot, to whom she looked as a model of form, and integrity. That last is important, for this quality in George Eliot, as I have said earlier, resulted in a power of minute inquisition and subjective inquiry that opened a new domain to the English novel, one that was instantly invaded by George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James.

In point of time, George Meredith (1828-1909) was a contemporary of George Eliot, his first book, *The Shaving of Shagpat* (an oriental entertainment in the manner of his father-in-law T. L. Peacock) appearing in 1856. His first novel proper, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, with which he came near to making a bid for popularity, was published in 1859, in the same year as *Adam Bede*. It can hardly be said, therefore, that he was influenced by George Eliot. Both these strong-minded writers must have taken something from the air. Meredith took it, whatever it was, with much more of a gesture, his nostrils dilated in characteristic ecstasy, while he stood tip-toe to snuff at the exhilarating riches, and to convert them into phrases equally as intoxicating, equally as dazzling. He was the first of the great English novelists to begin to make capital out of unintelligibility. Whether or not he did it deliberately, he made a mistake in doing so, for we see today that it has not only damaged his reputation, by making his work date; but he has set a bad example for all charlatans and intellectual coxcombs who care to forget that the first duty of a writer is to communicate something to the reader.

Meredith was a highly complicated man, but before everything else he was a poet, a magnificent drunkard of words, and it may be that as a poet his name will survive. His novels are elaborate poems in prose, carrying back to

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the Elizabethan days, and the work of John Lyly; and carrying forward to a whole school of writers of our time, who, with a further direction from the exquisite experimentalist Virginia Woolf, now use the novel as a vehicle for subjective lyrical self-expression, haunted by characters who float half-embodied, between the ground of actuality and the sky of idea. Their number is legion, and most of them are women novelists, who explore deeper and deeper into the emotional scenery of their own sex. One of them, Dorothy Richardson, an older contemporary of Virginia Woolf, has made almost a scientific practice of this activity, her life-work consisting of a sequence of some dozen novels, called *Pilgrimage* (begun in 1915) in which a world of women is so delicately articulated, that the incursion of a male at once holds up the development, like a bull in a china-shop; the stream of consciousness flowing on again only when the intruder has removed himself. This remarkable work, another piece of pioneering in the art of fiction, was contemporary with the novels of Marcel Proust in France, and in this conjunction we see another sign (as in that of Meredith and George Eliot) of the workings of the dominating spirit of the age.

That particular domination has been growing, however, since the middle of the nineteenth century, when social developments took a wrong turning, and democracy, rearing its head, was seen to exhibit features as gross as those of its former masters. Disillusionment, that emotional reaction of post-maturity, was beginning to creep in, and the odd thing is that its effect was to be noticed in the poetry of Robert Browning, thought to be the incorrigible optimist of his age. But Browning's great epic poem *The Ring and the Book*, was an agonized inquiry into human conduct, and from that time onwards the fulcrum of our capacity for judgements has been uncertain. We look more and more to the sources of human impulse, and less to its demonstration. For this reason, I would say that *The Ring and the Book*, and Browning's genius in general, have played an important part in the development of the Eng-

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lish novel as it has since been carried through Meredith, Hardy, James, and others.

Meredith lived with the pre-Raphaelites, and his descriptive writing, which plays so large a part in his books, owes much of its intensity, freshness, and lucidity to the various members of that school of painters. Interested first in the workings of the mind, he always related them to environment. And that environment was for him a splendour of light and air, the godlike whisperings of nature, with the sun coming down, the moon and the heaven of stars, to touch the imaginations of his characters as the old gods of Olympus came down to direct the affairs of Homer's people. For Meredith, the whole universe was a Circean isle; a temptation lurked in every strand of English bramble, every drop of dew on the chalk downs, every gesture of a child running at dawn across a landscape shawled with frost. The pictures in his novels, painted in words composed as a palette of extravagance, are a constant evocation of the unevocable. He hovers always on the brink of the invisible world beyond light, his music that of a lark disappearing upwards into space. It was too much to expect a large public to follow him, for the effort demanded an athleticism of mind to which only the few are sufficiently disciplined at any one time. His style, mannered and elliptical, huge in its references, diaphanous in its atmosphere, was too much for the solid Victorians. It remains too much for most of us today, though in the interim, towards the end of his life, Meredith took his place as a master and veteran of English letters, to receive homage from all over the world, and from the best spirits of his time.

Diana of the Crossways (1885) became the most popular of his novels. *The Egoist* (1879), published two years after his illuminating essay on what he called 'The Comedic Spirit', is his most characteristic and mature work. This book has a Molière-like concentration upon the foibles of a central character, Sir Willoughby Patterne, a monster of self-concern. In portraying him, and setting him in his

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environment of a noble country-house and the English landscape, Meredith offers the reader, through every possible distortion of English syntax, which he uses as a child uses a glass prism to break up the light, a picture of life in which the chiaroscuro, the dominant tone, is one of April sun and shower, with all the flowers of Botticelli alight in a young green world.

Much play could be made here by the historian with the various compartments of subject-matter into which the novel may be divided. There are the novels dealing with the growth of outdoor sport, such as those of Robert Surtees, Hawley Smart, and Whyte-Melville. Surtees alone survives, because he created a character who ran (or rather hunted) through serial after serial, the immortal Mr Jorrocks, a tradesman turned country-gentleman, whose comic adventures fulfil the programme which was originally intended for Dickens's Mr Pickwick, who turned instead and followed the whims of his creator's genius. There are the novels concerned with the religious controversy which raged throughout the nineteenth century; Charlotte M. Yonge, Mrs Humphry Ward, the Scottish novelist Mrs Oliphant, Mrs Craik, Charles Kingsley, George Macdonald being the most eminent writers interested in this theme.

But to discuss the novel from this point of view is purely utilitarian, and of short-lived value. We want rather to see how, and what new personalities are making their mark, and in what way their handling of the novel is affecting its scope and its form.

Only a little later than George Eliot and Meredith, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) appeared as one of these makers of mark. A Dorchester man, he wrote of that south-western part of England which he renamed Wessex, and succeeded in building up, through his novels and his poetry, an immortal region which, though since dating in small particulars, will be likely to remain as a realm unto itself, where time is arrested at the command of art, and every day, every leaf, every human gesture, are as im-

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mortal as the processional figures on Keats's Greek vase. It is almost too easy to fall into adulation when discussing Hardy; and this in spite of the dislike which he aroused in so many contemporaries. He was assailed by the conventional moralists because of his compassion for the weak and the sinful (a characteristic too Christian for many official Christians to acknowledge). George Moore denied that he could write English. Today, those criticisms, of content and of form, can be looked at dispassionately. The adventures and persons in Hardy's novels which shocked the Victorians and called down so much abuse on him that he finally gave up writing novels, are now regarded as quaint and old-fashioned. Tess and Jude, once unmentionable characters in many quarters, are today naïve innocents for whom we have a deep pity. The more modern and hard-boiled among us may also feel no little contempt for the way in which these two exercised themselves so desperately over problems that for us no longer have any reality.

As for Hardy's style, once so savagely attacked by the exotic George Moore, and as savagely defended by critics who pointed out the luxurious, mossy, redolent sensuousness of Hardy's phrases and neologisms, we find today that his dialogue has grown somewhat stiff, and his descriptive writing stilted. Yet it remains the prose of a poet in close contact with things, a creature of tangibilities, even in the imaginative handling of abstract ideas. There is indeed a Keats-like quality in Hardy. His 'soul doth ache' with physical as well as spiritual longings, and in his evocation of scenes and persons, his senses bring into play a verbal incantation that relates him to the pre-Raphaelites (as Meredith was) but through the sensual side, and thus directly to Keats, the progenitor of that School. We think of Keats's description of Madeleine 'unclasping her warmed jewels, one by one', and are reminded of Hardy's picture of Tess coming down, on a hot summer afternoon, from her nap, to the silent kitchen, and yawning 'like a sunned cat': and of Eustacia Vie, in *The Return of the*

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Native (1878), walking along a cliff, and laughing so that the sun shone into her mouth, 'as into an open, red tulip'.

This approach to life through the sensibilities dictated the approach which Hardy made to the novel, and also his enlargement of it. The poetic values that Meredith returned to the novel were brought through the channel of reason, in High Comedy. Hardy came, also with a rich poetic contribution, from the opposite side. His world was one of simple, inarticulate country folk, whose literacy, when they were literate at all, was one of Bible imagery, which coloured their conversation with an old-fashioned, seventeenth-century pedantry. In Hardy's hands it remained enchanting. It has since become Uncle Tom Cobblesish, and also meaningless because the remote parts of England are now as cinema-minded and articulated as are Clapham and Oswestry. To write in rustic vein today is to write insincerely. Indeed, the most unmodern parts of the social fabric are sometimes to be found in the little hamlets-within-the-city, where the impact of mechanization is largely inapplicable, and the country labourer's new worship of the machine has no significance.

This physical and instinctive force which set Hardy's creative imagination to work in the novel, resulted in a closeness of contact between reader and the world in the books, such as had never been known before. It was this that led to the accusation that he indulged in French realism, an attitude of candour and frankness in portrayal and discussion which shocked contemporary taste as today exhibitionism shocks us. Further, Hardy added to his offence by knowing so much about the philosophic and scientific inquiry of his day. He rejected orthodox religious consolations, and cried out against the loneliness of his discovery that human consciousness had reached a point of sensitiveness too fine for the workings of the rest of nature. Man, said Hardy, had out-raced his own gods in this matter, and was now to be seen (in these novels of the simple

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folk of Wessex, as in the plays of Aeschylus) turning and attempting to civilize the gods, with disastrous results. This was regarded as blasphemy, and Hardy was reviled on a second account. His last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1896), accentuated all those traits for which he was vilified, and in disgust and bewilderment he vowed to write no more novels. His later work, including the vast epic-drama *The Dynasts*, was in verse, a vehicle that carried the same Hellenic outlook, and used the English language with the same bucolic tenderness and intimacy, as the novels.

He has left a body of fiction unique in its uniformity. Never has a region been so comprisingly celebrated as in these books. And within that world, out of which Hardy stepped timidly and with awkward results, he has created hundreds of characters, many of them mere choral voices in an ale-house commentary that takes the place played by strophe and antistrophe in the classic Greek drama, who live with a close and intimate endearment for generation after generation of readers. Their clothes and manners are becoming somewhat period-dated now, but the people themselves are still warm-blooded, still capable of infinite suffering and gusty happiness. They dance and sing, eat and drink, work and make love; and on some occasions they do more desperate things, such as murder and adultery, and moral cheating. And all this is for ever taking place in a countryside of downland, sea-border, plashy meadows, and creamy farms, where milk and cider flow, and the breath of cows is sweet, and lavender is laid in the drawers of old furniture in rooms where man and wife sleep, in beds that their forebears were born in, and died in.

The plots creak today, like farm-carts. But they carry the load. Coincidence (as when the letter that would have eased the whole tragic situation in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is slipped under the door, and by chance goes under the carpet and is never found) plays too large a part in these tales. But so it does again in the Greek records of human

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fate. And so it does too in real life, though the critic should hold no brief for real life as a model for art. Hardy's art is a deliberate as well as an instinctive one. He is part of his own Wessex world, one with his people, a child of his countryside. When he leaves it he is quaint and mannered, like a farmer come to town in a stiff suit; or perhaps an old country doctor. But back in his own world, all his sagacity, his scholarship, his firsthand knowledge of place and people, of nature and the ineffable over-spirit of time and place, return to inform his art. At its best, as in *The Woodlanders*, one of the most beautiful novels in the English language, that art is almost beyond criticism. Here is a sylvan genius in full display. Within the pages of this book, we smell and hear, touch and see with an intimacy that we take for granted, until we pause to reflect that after all, this amazing experience is a verbal one, a conjuring by the poet who has brought us to these woodlands, these soils and waters, and finally to these few folk of such close, inarticulate relationship with each other and with us who are invited to share their destinies; and such heart-rending destinies. The contact is almost too painful. We wake, after the death of Giles Winterbourne, and the final valediction of his love Marty South, with a start of incredulity not at the story, but at the world around us, and of our own affairs. Which, we ask, is the real world? And the answer is a long time in coming to our bewitched minds.

Hardy, therefore, is important in the history of the novel, because he brought it back to its full authority of poetry. I spoke of Aeschylus; here is what Hardy did. He used the novel in English as that ancient father of Greek drama used the stage and the religious grove. He kept the novel in the centre of life's road, with no eccentric turn to right or left, of verbal foppery or intellectual trope. He was essentially humble-minded, and that is a base which in the long run affords the firmest of all human perspectives against which to pose the story of man-in-passing.

The deep compassion which was the moving spirit of so

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much in Hardy's novels, reappeared in a curiously distorted form in the work of two writers who were more naturalistic than he, writers who owed more patently a debt to Balzac and Zola, those realists frowned on in Victorian England. George Moore (1852-1933) and George Gissing (1857-1903) are novelists whose early work is comparable because both set out to picture the rather drab world which had sprung into being as an under-stratum of the new industrial society. Their ways soon diverged, for Moore, a chameleon in art, turned to other ventures. He was the younger son of an Anglo-Irish landed family, born in an atmosphere of racing stables. He was caught by the aesthetic movement, and went to study art in Paris, where he sat among the great.

His adventures are described in his several autobiographical books, including *The Confessions of a Young Man* (1888) and *Hail and Farewell* (a trilogy) 1911-14, books in which his native gifts are most happily developed. He was a complex character, despised by many of his acquaintance, who nicknamed him The Beetle. He was perverse, as in his artful reference to 'my father's serfs' in his description of his early life; a deliberately faked phrase, betraying only one of his many literary adherences, the Russian, for in the eighties and nineties Turgenev and Dostoevski were being discovered in English literary circles. He was unstable in character, turning first to one enthusiasm, then to another. But throughout his life he kept a constancy to one thing, and that was his determination to become a good writer. He succeeded.

His journey to success was a varied one, and he did not fully discover himself until he had played 'the sedulous ape' to several masters, whom he found during his early years in Paris. But even in that tutelary work, he produced novels which have survived and are still to be enjoyed, for more than their successful imitation of Zola (as in *The Mummer's Wife*, 1884), of Balzac and Flaubert (as in *Esther Waters*, 1894, his first success), and of Huysmans (as in *Evelyn Innes* and *Sister Teresa*, 1901).

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His subsequent essays in autobiography helped him to find a prose style which later he developed into a mannerism. Leaving the matter-of-fact documentary method, by which he built up in his early books the minute actualities of the raffish racing world, he began to elaborate a kind of fugal writing, in which the prose runs along with an almost watery monotony, all colour saturated out of it, all shapes flattened. Its surface is that of ivory, old ivory much handled. Through this medium, one essentially of contemplative and reminiscential mood, he travelled towards a form of fiction that brought to the English novel another territory, half-dream, half-real, with touches of Celtic mysticism and folklore to stain it to those underwater hues which we associate with the wall-paintings of Puvis de Chavannes. These later books, *A Storyteller's Holiday*, *The Brook Kerith*, and *Aphrodite in Aulis* appeared towards the end of his life. In their technical experiment, they are almost as distinctive as the later work of another Irishman, James Joyce, but their verbal adventure is always towards a perfect lucidity, the dialogue and the narrative being so fused into one that the whole process is an incantation in prose.

George Gissing also changed as he developed, and this too, was out of realism into mellow and classical serenity. Gissing, however, was a pioneer not in technique (for he was quite conventional and not very stimulating or gifted as a word-artist) but in psychological attack on his theme. He was an unfortunate man, fate's fool. While a brilliant and promising student at Manchester University, he got entangled with a woman who led him to improvident conduct. He stole from fellow-students and went to prison. From that time his life was a sordid struggle against his own self-pitying and perverse actions. Twice he married disastrously. He lived in the slums of London, keeping himself alive by overwork, while his novels were written with agonizing labour and revision, with perpetual false starts. These experiences are described in his novel *New Grub Street* (1891), where his characteristic self-pity in its

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full morbidity is given rein. The titles of some of his many novels are sufficient to show how he was preoccupied, to the point of mania, with this problem of the under-dog, the defeated, the victim of poverty and failure: *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), *The Unclassed* (1884), *The Nether World* (1889), *Born in Exile* (1892), *The Odd Women* (1893), this last a particularly depressing tale of spinster sisters living somewhere near Clapham Junction, and dully taking to secret drinking. In these gloomy studies of lower-middle-class life on the ebb tide, he was the first English novelist to explore the methods used by Dostoevski. Both men were somewhat pathological, and both used their malaise as the raw material of their art. Gissing dived deep into the privacies of self-contemplation. He left no stone unturned, and always found a revolting, white maggot under every one, a maggot of obsession, misery, reluctant despair, and ineffectual resentment. He was an inspired grouser. Everything was always wrong, but by his literary gifts (strengthened by a scholar's mind and equipment, for he was an instinctive classicist) he worked up those wrongs into works of an art that enriched our fiction.

With the coming of recognition and economic amelioration, he threw off some of his gloomy obsessions. After his second marriage had broken down, a French woman took charge of him, and for the first time he knew a really understanding love-companionship. They went abroad, to the Mediterranean world for which his scholarly and history-leaning mind yearned. The result was a number of books that gave rein to his intellectual aristocracy of mood: *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), fictional autobiography, and an unfinished tale *Veranhilda* (1904) which, for its fine objective firmness, its sure sense of setting, its ease of presentation, is a masterly fragment comparable to Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston*. Had these two books been finished, they might have stood out as peaks in the landscape of English fiction. A later novelist who has similarly explored the nervous obsessions of men and women whose sensibilities are too

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acute to cope with the toughness of modern industrial society, with its advanced competitiveness, is Frank Swinnerton. He too sets most of his books among the lower-middle class, in London of the city and the suburbs. He too knows the agonies of irresolution and frustrated pride. But he removes the self-pity, and replaces it by a sturdy common sense, similar to that shown in the work of Dickens and Arnold Bennett. He is also a better craftsman than Gissing, especially in the handling of plot and the general construction of a tale. His tale *Nocturne* (1917) shows a sweetness of temperament such as Gissing never possessed. This quality has kept Swinnerton, as a novelist, along the middle of the highroad of our English journey in the novel, sane, broad, understanding, with the companionship of Arnold Bennett. He too is a regionalist, for not since Dickens has there been a novelist who has written so revealingly of London; its centre, and its amazing periphery.

Amid this exploration by Gissing and Moore of French and Russian realism, and the possibilities of reaction from it, the spirit of romance survived. Indeed, as time passes, we see that romance is the constant towards which all forms of fiction return. The incredible, the ideal, these are the lodestars of human interest. That interest was catered for by Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad, along with a host of smaller writers, such as Rider Haggard, Seton Merriman, Stanley Weyman, Anthony Hope. The number is legion, and the quality at that time, in the later decades of the nineteenth and first one of the twentieth centuries, was high, especially in the matter of construction. Seton Merriman, in particular, was possessed of a suave mastery, both in controlling a plot and revealing a character.

In discussing the survival of romance alongside the realism practised during the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the great awakening among American writers. In a short study of the English novel, it is hardly possible to include the

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riches that have come from the New World. Two novelists of great magnitude, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, shine in the West. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, *House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance*, and Melville's *Moby Dick*, are stories in which the fundamental forces of conscience, remorse, religious bigotry, lust for power, are personified as in a morality play. Both men of New England Puritan stock, they had in their bones the rigidity of folk whose ancestors had left Europe in search of freedom, the freedom to impose their principles upon circumstances and anybody who got in the way. Both were artists of profound sensibility who reacted against that ancestry, but in terms of a traditional literary technique. Hawthorne's prose is sombre, like velvet dark-dyed. Melville's is extravagant, Elizabethan, fitting vehicle for his mad allegory of the White Whale and the sea-captain who sacrificed himself to the hunting of this fabulous monster. In audacity of form, the book may be compared perhaps to *Tristram Shandy*. It has similar verbal rhodomontades, cadenzas which hold up the tale, and also hold the reader spellbound. One thinks of the chapter on Noses (the Slawkenburgius chapter) in *Tristram Shandy*, and compares it with the chapter in *Moby Dick*, where the anatomy of the whale, and a survey of its vast skeleton, is blue-printed.

The work of Hawthorne, Melville, and other prominent practitioners of the English novel in America, is discussed in the several volumes of Van Wyck Brooks's cultural history of American letters.

At first, the American writers were content to reflect English fashions, but with the turn of the century this conservatism was overwhelmed by the very glut of material being offered to writers in the New World, children of a pioneer civilization growing so rapidly over so vast and varied an area, under conditions utterly different from those in a Europe fettered by history. New themes, new manners, adopted by a new social organism built out of a racial olla podrida, demanded heroic efforts from the

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novelists who were to portray this environment. The tendency has been towards both more primitive and more heroic fiction; vast tales, almost sagas, of regional interest, of man's conquest of the wild, of the establishing of new orders of society, and of the conflicting pains of their growth. A violence in technical expression, and in the posing of human conduct, has become a convention most clearly defined in the work of Ernest Hemingway.

The primitive sentimentality underlying this 'tough' school of writing is an inevitable accompaniment, for both spring from a freshness of interest, a naïvety towards circumstances; qualities of youth in all its eagerness and unsophistication. Yet a paradox is there; with the extremes of violence and sentiment, there goes a terse, laconic idiom, of mind as well as of phrase, which suggests a weary sophistication approaching to decadence and moral and emotional catastrophe. Between the two poles of innocence and disillusionment, the mechanics of the English novel in America continues to function through infinite gradations. From time to time, writers usually from the old New England families with civilization in their blood, escape from the turmoil. The greatest of these have been Henry James, Edith Wharton, and T. S. Eliot. The last has not written novels, and is thus outside our survey. All three have been concerned, however, to re-establish within their own minds a convincing sensibility, whose expression shall be an art-form as remote as possible from that of the raw American culture. Europe, and the muse of history, had been for them symbols almost religious in significance.

Henry James (1843-1916) was the first to rehabilitate himself in the Old World. He suffered, as all *émigrés* suffer, from a certain degree of aridity due to being uprooted. He, like the rest, was self-conscious to a degree in his new aloofness and fastidious cultivation of finesse of manners, taste, and spiritual experience. The whole of James's work, and particularly his later work is the attempt to explore the furthest possibilities of individual feeling, its genesis in motive, and its expression in conduct. In this attempt,

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he brought to the novel a slow-motion tempo, which H. G. Wells, his friendly adversary, likened to the efforts of 'an elephant to pick up a pea'. He lacked poetic *nous*, the instinct for the telling image and word. His prose is clumsy, and to the end of his life he never mastered the use of the parenthesis and the manipulation of the comma. It is maddening to read his prose; but one goes on reading because of the extreme range of consciousness, the microscopic approach to the niceties of human conduct and inference. A little means so much; but it all takes place in a world without roots. Hotels, pensions in Paris, salons, play the major part in the scenery of James's fiction. His work is utterly without regional colour, and fundamentally it has no social solidity. His people are ephemerids hovering over a human society already showing signs of the decomposition which we see today in acceleration. He was thus a prophet of the end of a civilization, and of the last confines of the province of the English novel.

His explorations have been taken further, over that edge, by the Irish novelist James Joyce (1882-1941). Both were men of genius, concerned with moral problems and the guilt felt by the individual in revolt against a decaying society, and its degrading impositions. Joyce's experiment in revolt has been so startling, especially on the linguistic side (he has made the revolt of the individual so pronounced that he had even to invent an elliptical vocabulary of his own, comparable to the technique in painting invented by Picasso, thus divorcing himself at once from the appreciation of the contemporary multitude), that a whole literature has sprung up in criticism of his aberrant experiments. The most penetrating study of him is by the novelist L. A. G. Strong, whose book *The Sacred River* explores, in detail, the expansion of the 'stream of consciousness' technique to one of an ocean of subconsciousness, and the explosion of intelligible English verbal use into a fragmentary pun-idiom out of which Joyce builds up an elaborate universe of allusion based on a massive scholarship in which the Greek classics and a Jesuitical

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theology predominate. It is singular that Henry James and James Joyce, two cosmopolitans who left their native lands, should have been for this second quarter of the twentieth century, the most influential practitioners of the English novel. They have made it that much more un-English, wresting it from its track along the middle of the road of common sense, happy-go-lucky handling of form, and undirected vagary. It may probably return to its norm, after the present autumn phase has died finally away into winter, to await another spring – and an English spring.

That, however, is of the future. There remains still to refer to the novelists who carried the romantic spirit over into the twentieth century, and through this impulse to add a cubit to the stature of the novel. Two who turned to James for advice were Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94) and Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), artists primarily concerned to communicate as lucidly as possible, through the cultivation of a prose ever more immaculate and purged of slovenly imagery, worn phrases, and colourless abstractions. Stevenson's prose had a dandy-like touch. He wore it with a gesture (and a glance in the mirror). Conrad was handicapped by using English as a borrowed garment. He was a Pole by birth, and an aristocrat. He used the sea for the setting of most of his tales, symbol of that freedom and range which had been denied to his compatriots by the Russian ascendancy in Poland. His prose reflects these origins. It is massive, rotund, stiff with dignity, and a vast, almost repelling courtesy. His genius is a poetic one. He sees in the mass, great generalities forming before his eyes like clouds coming over the horizon, to be coloured by sun or moonlight, according to time and mood. His people are posed rather in the manner of James, whose hesitant personality Conrad imitated to his own disadvantage as an artist. Many of his novels are elaborated unnecessarily by being told as tales within tales. At his best, as in the masterpiece *The Shadow Line*, he succeeds even in his own stately ambition. The texture of his books is sombre, rich,

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ample. His mastery of the paragraphic build-up is superb, especially when it escapes from the tutelage of James, who made him tend towards an empty rotundity. His value in our time is that his work is an ever-present reminder of the relation of the novel to poetry, and especially epic poetry; and he maintains this nobility not only in his idiom but in his devotion to the permanent and the fundamental qualities of human character.

Stevenson succeeded gradually in his aim. It was to perfect a completely objective medium for telling a story. Through the whims and graces of his prose, this purpose steadily won its way, and had not death cut him off too soon, he would have vindicated his process even more triumphantly than he did in *Kidnapped* and *The Weir of Hermiston*. If only he had been given the physique of Dumas, instead of the changeling body of a sick gypsy housing the inheritances of Scottish puritanism! How valuable a reminder, however, his novels remain, apart from their perennial pleasure for readers. They teach novelists in our generation to return to the prime function of their art, which is to tell a story that holds the listener entranced, no matter what may be happening in the field of conscience, while duty and politics wait.

In this aim at pure story-telling, through a medium whose literary beauty is perhaps unnoticed by the general reader because of its lucidity, several novelists since Stevenson have been consummate, and they must owe no little of their skill to his example, even though going to more direct sources for mentorship. Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), John Galsworthy (1867-1933), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Maurice Hewlett (1861-1923), James M. Barrie (1860-1937), Somerset Maugham (1874), were the most eminent at the beginning of the present century. Kipling, most at home in the short story, wrote *Kim* (1901) to prove that he was not merely a fire-eating chauvinist, but an artist of penetrative insight into the oriental way of life. Galsworthy, spokesman of the vanishing class of the small gentry and the rich mercantile class

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who were taking its place before the First World War, was an artist of sombre, almost feline sensuousness beneath his austere stoicism. His prose is like warm burgundy, poured into a glass of irony that instantly clouds at the contact. His *Dark Flower* (1913) is a novel written in a romantic intensity comparable to the poetic fervour which inspired Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Compton Mackenzie's *Guy and Pauline*. Here are three novels permanent in our literature, as single as perfect lyrics: and as moving. Galsworthy's major work, however, was more staid. The *Forsyte* novels, a saga of the rise and decline of the English mercantile class, is still read abroad as the typical history of the strange English people, with their subcurrent emotions, and their stoicism that at times can look so much like hypocrisy.

Arnold Bennett, a prolific novelist and journalist, has added at least one major work, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), to the fiction of our time. Here the influence both of Turgeniev and de Maupassant is immediately apparent; but the nature of the author, his hardy provincial character, sure knowledge of place and persons, shrewd faculty for approximate values, and above all his really noble compassion, have filled this carefully modelled book with human life.

Barrie, preferably a dramatist with remarkable skill in stagecraft, saturated his novels in a sentimentality that at times is disgusting to a healthy palate. It is a grotesque enlargement of a certain similar trait in Stevenson. Its effect has been to turn a later generation of readers away from books (*The Little Minister*, 1891; *A Window in Thrums*, 1889; *Sentimental Tommy*, 1896) that for several decades were best-sellers. A certain over-emphasis in emotional and mental gesture in the historical novels of Maurice Hewlett (*The Queen's Quair*, 1904; *Richard Yea-and-Nay*, 1900; *The Forest Lovers*, 1898) has also led to their displacement from the eminence which they reached in public favour because of their Brangwyn-like sweep of colour and design.

Somerset Maugham, however, has steadily held his grip

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on that public, and extended it in his late years, because of a sardonic element in his nature (tending to a spiritual nihilism), reflected in a prose style stripped to utilitarian purposes, both factors in his books which have been in harmony with the mood of English life during the past thirty troubled years. For long the critics either neglected or abused him. But now he has been made the darling of the cliques; an even more unsatisfactory fate. His long and most intimate novel *Of Human Bondage* (1915) stands out, beyond the vagaries of fashionable criticism.

Four novelists, carrying over two generations, whom I would associate with Galsworthy because of their deep sensibility, their passion for quietness and its spiritual influence in a noisy world, are Maurice Baring (1874-1946), Stephen Hudson (1868-1944), L. H. Myers (1891-1944) and C. P. Snow (contemporary). All four have perfected a personal idiom to express, through sparseness, almost through a technique of meiosis, contemplative and religious depths of emotional experience. For this reason their novels, sombre, profound, uphold the stands of civilization amid a world shaken by the violence of social earthquake and the aftermath of war.

This matter of sensibility, of the faculty for hearing the 'still small voice' during the lulls of the tumult, is an important one not only because it keeps in being a contact with moral values, but also because it restores the cauterized minds of people whom the din and fury of modern life have benumbed into callousness. Such writers as E. M. Forster, a gentle liberal platonist, and Elizabeth Bowen, possessed of a gracious dignity both in her prose and her choice of themes, have been distinguished in the years between the two World Wars by the serene yet ironic quietness with which they have maintained the standards of civil behaviour and thought. Those standards are always being attacked, in every generation, but today we see that attack aggravated on the one hand by people in cynical despair, and on the other by barbarous zealots. These two artists have resisted the onslaught not by counter-attack,

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but by a resolute stance that may, in certain lights, be mistaken for an attitude of superior aloofness. In fact it is one of noble stoicism; a gesture of survival, we may dare to hope.

It has been inevitable, however, that many novelists should have used their art more deliberately to an ulterior purpose. Urged on by their fear and detestation of what they see happening to the structure of society around them, they have taken the novel as a substitute for the sermon and the tract, to exhort their fellow-creatures to mend their ways before the Final Wrath hurls them to their doom. That admonitory note has always been apparent in all literatures; indeed, it is one of the sources of literature. Thus in times of change and upheaval, while good things perish with the bad, and strange new social vices and virtues have yet to be tested for their worth, it is to be expected that the function of the writer should be emphasized.

Outstanding amongst the prophetic voices has been Samuel Butler (1835-1902), a son of the rectory, who might almost be classed among those eccentrics who season our literature so plentifully. His output was large and various. He thought Homer was a woman, and that Handel was a demi-god: that illness was a vice; and crime an indisposition. He disliked women. All these matters he wrote about, through the medium of a prose as crisp as slightly overbaked breadcrust. He was the model and master for Bernard Shaw, at least in technical matters. Amidst his huge miscellany of output, there are two novels, the utopian *Erewhon* (1872), and *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), a savage study of the relationship between father and son (from the filial point of view). Under this influence, Shaw began writing novels, but they were two dimensional experiments, and added nothing to the art of fiction.

There was one man, however, who has proved to be a giant among our novelists, and it may be said that he too owed much of his incentive to Butler's example in the

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habits of prophecy. Herbert George Wells (1868-1946), born into the lower middle class, first saw life through the drab environment of Victorian suburbs. A personality of intense vigour, sensual confidence, and a powerful, synthesising intellect, he rebelled in youth against circumstances, turning to science for an instrument to replace what he believed to be the obsolescent social and political machinery with which the human race misgoverned itself. For the first half of his life, however, the nervous sensibility, the pure genius of the man, was in the ascendancy, and he produced a series of novels of character, tragi-comedies teeming with figures of universal significance. Through these books (the list is too big to quote here) there moves always a representative figure, the Little Man, the victim of an impoverished environment, ill-educated, tied by economic chains, bewildered by the clever, the rich, the brutal, who nevertheless walks on through life like Browning's Pippa, or the early Charlie Chaplin, wearing the cloak of innocence, and carrying the shield of good-humour. Later, Wells became more embittered as he saw the misapplication in social life of ideas, many of which he had originated. His later books grew turgid with argument and expostulation, and the story and characterization in them were driven underground. It may be that time will show his greatest and most representative book to be *Tono-Bungay* (1909). *Kipps* (1905) and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910) show that 'little man' most distinctly, the latter-day pilgrim struggling to make his escape from a suburban world of back-streets, sodden hoardings, incompetent shops, towards a communized society built of William Morris's dreams stiffened with aluminium alloys and laboratory testings. Wells's output and influence have been enormous. He is great because of his enormous vitality and courage. He used English as a cartoonist's medium, but with Michaelangelesque skill and scope. English society and literature remain permanently influenced by his genius, as they were influenced by Dickens almost a century earlier.

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The introduction of laboratory tests into the philosophy of art and social organization, has also been apparent in the novels of Aldous Huxley (1894) member of a famous family. He is also related to Matthew Arnold, a severe monitor of an earlier age.

By his early cynicism, based on a top-heavy intellectual equipment, Huxley made himself the spokesman of the younger generation who, after the First World War, believed themselves to be cheated of the millennium. A physical nausea towards all the processes of the body, especially those of sexual origin, was exploited by Huxley. Whether this was instinctive, or imitated from the pathological element in the work of Swift, its effect has been to make much of Huxley's fiction repulsive, while at the same time acting as an intoxicant to the seekers after mental and moral sensationalism. Both because of and in spite of these unwholesome elements in his work, Huxley has found a large audience, over the period of a generation.

So too has his friend D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), son of a miner, a writer who brought to the English novel a hectic fervour that was Keats-like in its intensity, its sense of touch. He could evoke the wonders of nature (rock, plant, and beast) as sensuously as could Richard Jefferies and W. H. Hudson (who have both, by this endowment, contributed their moiety to the riches of the novel). But Lawrence was also endowed with a great intellectual imagination, capable of wide scholarship and speculation. He might have been a philosopher in the inspired Nietzschean manner. Illness, and a morbid social self-consciousness due to his origins (for there were still class distinctions in those days) perverted his mind, and as disease commanded his body more and more, so his writings became obsessed by a sort of demoniac sexual mysticism in which blood and virility were used as symbols of an authority that was to displace sweet reason in the handling of human affairs. One novel, however, takes its place amongst those outstanding in our time, the semi-auto-

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biographical book *Sons and Lovers* (1913). Here the poetry predominates over ideology.

Since Huxley and Lawrence, a younger generation of novelists continues to use this medium as a weapon of destructive criticism of the human race, under a profession of contempt, or disgust. It is always a dangerous weapon, two-edged; but we all need the surgeon at some time or another, and we can welcome the acid attention of such writers as V. S. Pritchett, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh, none of whom, however, has offered much towards the technical enlargement of the English novel. But all three have applied it to critical purpose, holding it up as a mirror, if only a distorting mirror, of their own times.

The more disinterested and serene artists are those whose work is likely to survive. Among these, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) stands out as an exquisite craftsman. The value of her fiction is that she has carried it both forward and backward, by a cyclic process, to that spring of all fiction, poetry. Her novels are lyrical and at the same time sharp, clear, succinct. Even *The Waves* (1931), the most experimental of her books, remains with this emphatic lucidity of verbal form. The story is lost, or submerged, in the experiment, which is to carry the exploration of the 'stream of consciousness' a stage further, out of the bed of an individual life, to that of a group. Thus the tale becomes a kind of multi-part fugue, running at high speed, though to the eye of the reading mind it seems almost placid. From a technical point of view, the modern novel has not been taken further than this, except by James Joyce.

It is well to leave the story of the English novel here, as a reminder of the statement on the first page of this book, that the novel is fundamentally an aspect of poetry, a process of the imagination of man working through imagery and not through logic, to a presentation of himself and the world of which he is a part. Writers who do this (I would instance John Masefield, J. B. Priestley, Richard

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Aldington, Storm Jameson, Francis Brett Young, Hugh Walpole, H. E. Bates, Patrick Hamilton, P. H. Newby), are likely to hold a higher authority than all the proselytizers and doctrinaires, who seize the novel-form with zealous hands, and wrench it to purposes other than that of poetry, the ever-flowering tree of truth, and of understanding.

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